Universidade de Aveiro Departamento de Línguas e Culturas
2008

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Os Discursos da Ficção Juvenil de Michael Dorris e de Louise Erdrich

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Dissertação apresentada à Universidade de Aveiro para cumprimento dos requisitos necessários à obtenção do grau de Mestre em Estudos Ingleses, realizada sob a orientação científica do Doutor Kenneth David Callahan, Professor Associado do Departamento de Línguas e Culturas da Universidade de Aveiro.

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Manifesto a minha gratidão
à minha colega, Dr.ª Goretti Moreira, pelo apoio incondicional;
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às minhas amigas e aos meus amigos que, tão longe, sinto sempre perto.

palavras-chave ficção juvenil, diversidade cultural, culturas autóctones da América, identidade

resumo O presente trabalho propõe-se analisar a abordagem de culturas de povos autóctones da América, nas obras de ficção juvenil de Michael Dorris, *Morning Girl* (1992), *Guests* (1994) e *Sees Behind Trees* (1996) e, de Louise Erdrich, *The Birchbark House* (1999) e *The Game of Silence* (2005), em particular a questão da mudança cultural e como esta pode ser sentida e articulada pela voz de jovens adolescentes. Assim, esta análise proporciona uma perspectiva da ficção juvenil enquanto veículo de construção de respeito pela diversidade cultural.

keywords juvenile fiction, cultural diversity, Native American cultures, identity

abstract This dissertation aims to analyse the works of juvenile fiction written by Michael Dorris, *Morning Girl* (1992), *Guests* (1994) and *Sees Behind Trees* (1996), and by Louise Erdrich, *The Birchbark House* (1999) and *The Game of Silence* (2005), in terms of their approach to Native American cultures, particularly the issue of cultural change and how this might be experienced and articulated by young adolescent voices. The analysis thus provides a perspective on juvenile fiction as a means of encouraging respect for cultural diversity.

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1. Introduction

A book, if it arrives before you at the right moment, in the proper season, at a point of intermission in the daily business of things, will change the course of all that follows.
(Dorris *Paper Trail* 285)
Michael Anthony Dorris

Words. Words. Words. Pressing up from her stomach, trembling on her lips. Words buzzing in her throat like caught bees. Banging in her head. . . . Sounds boiling up in her like sap. (Erdrich *GS* 12)
Karen Louise Erdrich

In deciding a field of study for my dissertation I considered not only the pleasure taken in the selected subject, but also the ensuing benefits of exploring a thus far unknown area of studies to me. Accordingly, in Post-Colonial Studies, my attention was drawn to literature by Native American authors, especially with the reading of Gordon Henry Junior's *The Light People* whose circular storyline and intricate characters left a strong impression. Consequently, I was led to consider such issues as: the notion that cultural respect is essential within the present-day world that defines itself as multicultural; the belief that it is crucial for younger generations to become aware of cultural difference; the concept that cultural difference implies critical cultural respect; the belief that literature is a privileged field for conveying different ideas and perspectives; the importance of Native American literature within the North American context which is perceived as multicultural; and, eventually, the belief that literature, with the unlimited field of human imagination of the reader on the one hand, and the rich field of cultural flows conveyed by the writer on the other, widens the range of acceptance of cultural difference.

Therefore, this dissertation aims to analyse the works of juvenile fiction written by Michael Dorris, *Morning Girl* (1992), *Guests* (1994) and *Sees Behind Trees* (1996), and by Louise Erdrich, *The Birchbark House* (1999) and *The Game of Silence* (2005), in terms of their approach to Native American cultures, particularly the issue of cultural change and how this might be experienced and

articulated by young adolescent voices. The analysis thus provides a perspective on juvenile fiction as a means of encouraging respect for cultural diversity.

Research work was firstly undertaken in the United States. In the state of Minnesota, University of Minnesota, at the Wilson Library, I established closer contact with my chosen field of study and, at Birchbark Books, Louise Erdrich's own bookshop, while acquiring books of relevance to the dissertation, rather unexpectedly, I was privileged to be personally introduced to Louise Erdrich herself. Later, in the state of New Hampshire, I proceeded with the research at the Rauner Library and Native American Studies Research Library, at Dartmouth College, the institution where Michael Dorris was the first appointed Chairman of Native American Studies in 1972. Finally, in the state of New York, further although brief research was carried out at the New York Public Library. Returning to Portugal, research work was undertaken at the University of Aveiro, both in the Mediateca and the Biblioteca Geral.

In a preliminary note pertaining to the designation of the indigenous peoples living presently in the United States of America, I should point out that, throughout this dissertation, I predominantly use the designation "Native Americans". My decision might be easily refuted as Devon Abbott Mihesuah (Chahta) observes in *American Indians: Stereotypes and Realities*: "[t]he terms 'American Indians,' 'Native Americans,' or 'First Nations' are incorrect because these are European terms" (16). Nonetheless, in view of the overall approach of this dissertation as well as the several indigenous peoples who populate the indicated works of juvenile fiction, the aforementioned choice seems to be adequate. Furthermore, bearing in mind Mihesuah's remark on the correctness of the issue, when possible, I refer to each people by the name its members call themselves. As regards each quoted Native American author's affiliation, I enclose it in parentheses in my first introduction of the author in the body of the text.

This introduction attempts to provide a brief historical contextualization of the indigenous peoples of the American continent with respect to the notions of freedom, colonialism, post-colonialism, and sovereignty, as well as their

subsequent cultural production; then, to ponder on the concepts of multiculturalism and cultural diversity; and, finally, to consider the relevance of stories, the importance of storytelling in the Native American oral tradition, and the peril of stereotyping.

History has it that the United States of America has long been perceived, not least by itself, as “the land of freedom”. Eric Foner, author of *The Story of American Freedom*, clarifies that “freedom embodies not a single idea but a complex of values” (xv) and further indicates that it is “a morally charged idea . . . [which] has been used to convey and claim legitimacy for all kinds of grievances and hopes, fears about the present and visions of the future” (xv-xvi). From the beginning however, the accuracy of this claim of freedom by the emerging nation was questionable, since it disregarded indigenous peoples as part of that endeavour. Later on, Native people were simply considered a hindrance, in the way of expansion westwards:

> The idea that theirs was an empire of liberty enabled Americans to ignore some unpleasant truths about westward expansion. For one thing, the continent was not, in fact, empty. For centuries, the West had been a meeting ground of peoples, whose relationships were shaped by conquest as much as free choice. It was also, therefore, the site of clashing definitions of liberty. . . . The Native American idea of freedom, however, which centered on preserving their cultural and political autonomy and retaining control of ancestral lands, was incompatible with that of western settlers, for whom freedom entailed the right to expand across the continent and establish farms, ranches, and mines on land that Indians considered their own. Indian removal—accomplished by fraud, intimidation, and violence—was indispensable to the triumph of manifest destiny and the American mission of spreading freedom. (Foner 51)

It is highly ironic that, having undergone battles to free themselves from the British Empire and found “the land of freedom”, the politically active citizens of the United States had “the idea that theirs was an *empire* of liberty” (Foner 51) [my italics]. Eric Foner also declares that “freedom is the oldest of clichés and the most modern of aspirations. At various times in our history it has served as a ‘protest ideal’ and as a justification of the status quo. Freedom helps bid our culture

together and exposes *the contradictions between what America claims to be and what it actually is*" (xv-xvi) [my italics]. It follows that "America", as the United States are as often as not referred to, is said to be the Western nation par excellence that prides itself on embodying a challenging cultural diversity within its borders — this is "what America claims to be" (Foner 51). Nonetheless, nowadays "America" is also perceived as a colonising nation, as implied by Peter McLaren in the introduction to his book *Critical Pedagogy and Predatory Culture: Oppositional Politics in a Postmodern Era*. Hence, and bearing in mind the critical thought of Fredric Jameson, McLaren indicates that, mostly since the late 1950s, "a whole new system of cultural production emerged and a new, specifically American cultural apparatus … began to serve as a form of ideological hegemony" (17). He further states that "even in this so-called era of interculturalism and growth of poly-ethnic and poly-lingual communities" (McLaren 10), the prevailing social order of this globalising nation still keeps "the colonized out of history" (McLaren 10), in other words, Native Americans — and this is "what [America] actually is" (Foner 51).

Considering this perception of American colonialism, the question that subsequently arises is whether or not North American cultural production is postcolonial. At the outset of the seventeenth century, English settlers established themselves on the North American East coast founding a colony belonging to the British Crown. Then, as expected, they proceeded with the colonisation of the territory and moved northwards, southwards and westwards. Later on, having achieved economic strength, and with the removal of the threat of the French after their defeat in the French and Indian War (1756-1763), they declared political independence and became a free sovereign nation. In the second half of the eighteenth century, the United States of America ceased to be colonial. In this view, subsequent North American cultural production is postcolonial. This line of thought is only adequate if the indigenous population of North America is excluded. Native Americans, however, witnessed the invasion and colonisation of the land they considered their home from time immemorial and attempted, though most of the time unsuccessfully, to invert the process. In the end, the invaders did not retreat and the colonisers have continued to rule over the land and its

inhabitants. In the beginning of the twenty-first century, Native Americans are, to all intents and purposes, still colonised and the United States are the colonising nation. In this view, Native American cultural production is not postcolonial.

In point of fact, in *The Turn to the Native: Studies in Criticism and Culture*, Arnold Krupat declares that "[i]n the current climate of literary studies, it is tempting to think of contemporary Native American literatures as among the postcolonial literatures of the world" (30). "Yet", Krupat adds, "contemporary Native American literatures cannot quite be classed among the postcolonial literatures of the world for the simple reason that there is not yet a 'post-' to the colonial status of Native Americans" (Krupat 30). Nonetheless, the author further sustains, despite being created "in a condition of ongoing colonialism" (Krupat 32), a few contemporary Native American works of fiction "not only [have] the look of postcolonial fiction but also . . . [perform] ideological work that parallels that of postcolonial fiction elsewhere" (Krupat 32).

Taking the notion of American colonialism and the sovereignty of Native American peoples' into consideration, Mihesuah clarifies that, "the U.S. federal government considers the tribes on the almost 300 reservations to be *quasi-sovereign, domestic, dependent nations*. The United States government, in what many believe to be an abuse of its role as the stronger sovereign, retains the questionable right to eradicate tribal authority" (Mihesuah *Stereotypes* 90) [my italics]. As for the federal government, it "is responsible for protecting Indian lands and resources (including wildlife, water, minerals, and hunting and fishing rights), and for providing necessary social services (health care, education, housing, transportation development and food distribution)" (Mihesuah *Stereotypes* 91). Ultimately, due to the fact that Native peoples "are inherently sovereign, individual states may not exercise authority over them unless authorized by Congress" (Mihesuah *Stereotypes* 91).

However, Native Americans' official sovereignty as well as its political, social and cultural weight within North American society have been overlooked. In recent times, the United States has developed several actions in an effort to adjust and improve the lives of its inhabitants. Hence, in this multicultural country, as attention is drawn to its conventionally designated "minority groups", it more often

than not takes either African Americans or immigrants into consideration, whereas the indigenous inhabitants of North America are simply disregarded.

Yet, despite a loss of cultural features, James Banks, author of *Multiethnic Education: Theory and Practice*, states that among the ethnic groups in the United States, Native Americans have retained a long-lasting and fiercely-upheld cultural identity. In fact, Banks recalls that, in the beginnings of the colonisation of North America, "assimilation, or adherence to Anglo-Saxon sociocultural traditions and values, became a prerequisite to social acceptability and access to the political structure" (68), thus dissuading the existence of non-Anglo-Saxon values and ways of life. Stigmatisation originated a loss of features of the first North American inhabitants' cultures, and "even when . . . Native Americans succeeded in becoming culturally assimilated, they were still structurally isolated and were denied full, unqualified entry into the organizations and institutions sanctioned by the larger society. They became, in effect, marginal persons, for they were not accepted totally by their own ethnic group or by the mainstream culture" (Banks 69). Being "marginal persons", the ones that did not fit in mainstream "America", Native Americans came to be "often described in misleading ways, such as living in tepees. One result of such perceptions and descriptions is the perpetuation of stereotypes about different ethnic, cultural, and racial groups" (Banks 84). Subsequently, Banks points out that the recurrent perception in schools that cultures are "static, unchanging, and fragmented" (84) should be substituted by a view of cultures as "dynamic, complex, and changing" (84).

Devon Mihesuah further supports the idea that the key word is difference. That is, bearing the Euro-American conception of the world in mind, civilization was a term which established "an advanced stage in social development [and was] distinguished by thought systems and other features unique to modern European societies. This in turn influenced . . . a negative evaluation of other societies as 'uncivilized,' [and] 'primitive,' . . . due to the absence of certain modern European features" (Mihesuah *Stereotypes* 37). However, the fact is that European and Native American cultures were and are not inferior or superior vis-à-vis the other, but different from one another.

Nowadays words and expressions such as multiculturalism, cultural respect, ethnicity and coexistence have become part of the vocabulary used when referring to our constantly changing view of the world, the United States included. As far as education is concerned, the designation of concepts is central and what we see is that there are substantial differences among the countries of the Western World. Writing on this subject matter, Banks states that those "researchers and policy makers who prefer intercultural to multicultural education contend that intercultural implies an education that promotes interaction among different cultures whereas multicultural does not imply such interaction. However intercultural education is rarely used outside of the European continent" (Banks 82). Nonetheless, and in spite of these diverging designations, there is an undeniable growing awareness among educators of the issues related to these concerns, although, as can be seen, the divergences are often profound. Taking into consideration the theory of multiethnic education, Banks considers that it is necessary to ponder on and further define the concept of cultural ethnic group; hence, the resulting definition establishes that:

> an ethnic group . . . shares a common set of values, experiences, behavioral characteristics, and linguistic traits that differ substantially from other ethnic groups within society. Individuals usually gain membership in such a group not by choice but through birth and early socialization. Individuals who are members of cultural ethnic groups are likely to take collective and organized actions to support public policies that will enhance the survival of the group's culture and ethnic institutions. Members of cultural ethnic groups also pass on the symbols, language, and other components of the cultural heritage to the next generation. The individual's ethnic cultural heritage is a source of pride and group identification. (Banks 73)

He further introduces the concept of a holistic ethnic group, i.e. "an involuntary group of individuals who share a sense of peoplehood and an interdependence of fate, a common sense of identity, and common behavioral characteristics" (Banks 74), and sustains that, as Native Americans become more politically active, they may be identified as belonging to this group.

As regards the United States, it is unquestionably a multicultural and multifaceted country. It moreover reinforces Paul Gilroy's published assumption in

The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness, that it is unimaginable to assume "that cultures always flow into patterns congruent with the borders of essentially homogeneous nation states" (5), especially when considering the multiplicity of Native American peoples, their cultures and languages. Moreover, in *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha suggests that:

> what is theoretically innovative . . . is the need . . . to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood - singular or communal - that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself. (Bhabha 1-2)

In this line of reasoning, it becomes important to consider the awareness of cultural difference and "the Other" in the process of the construction of cultural and personal identity. Moreover, it is of great importance to encourage the notion that cultural difference implies critical cultural respect, mostly within a world that defines itself as multicultural. In such a diverse society, individuals acknowledge their inner multiplicity. In an interview with Sneja Gunew on "Questions of Multi-culturalism", Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak declares that "one is not just one thing", as can be read in the following passage:

> The question of 'speaking *as*' involves a distancing from oneself. The moment I have to think of the ways in which I will speak as an Indian, . . . the ways in which I will speak as a woman, what I am doing is trying to generalise myself, make myself a representative, trying to distance myself from some kind of inchoate speaking *as such*. There are many subject positions which one must inhabit; *one is not just one thing*. That is when a political consciousness comes in. So that in fact, for the person who does the 'speaking as' something, it is a problem of distancing from one's self, whatever that self might be. [my italics] (Harasym 60)

Political consciousness is significant in a society that calls itself free, for it implies a conscious understanding of "the Self" and "the Other". According to Peter McLaren, "a critical understanding of the relationship between the self and other is one of the crucial challenges of current pedagogical practices in the age of postmodernism" (17). Educators should thus create a "pedagogy of 'difference'

which … seeks to locate difference in both its specificity and ability to provide positions for critically engaging social relations and cultural practices" (18). In this strain of thought, McLaren claims a pedagogy "which does not ask people to discard their ethnic and local attachments for more global commitments but rather interrogates *the universal already contained in the local* and examines how the ethnic and the regional *is already populated by other perspectives and meanings*" (24-25). An undeniable plurality is part of present-day society and "values so central to modernity—uniformity and universalism—have become ruptured, and replaced by coexistence and tolerance" (McLaren 16).

The use of story is a deep-rooted means of education of younger generations, and stories' role as transmitters of values, cultural behaviours, and long-established traditions has been fundamental in the construction of young people's personal identity. Despite this principle, shared by Western and Native American cultural flows, their narrative structures reflect a crucial distinction between their thoughts. On the one hand, Western folk tales have a prime linear time sequence, where time and space are defined in separate spheres, and the ending of the story is clear. Traditional stories have altered little with the passing time and, though initially oral in their form, a written form has imposed itself over the last few centuries. On the other hand, Native American narrative has a circular time sequence as Laura Coltelli elucidates in *Winged Words: American Indian Writers Speak*: "narrative architecture often takes the form of a circular progression, as an ongoing concept rather than a geometrical design; the ending coincides with a new beginning, mingling history and contemporary events in the communal act of storytelling" (2-3). Moreover, Native American perception views time and space in a unique inclusive sphere. Andrew Macdonald, Gina Macdonald, and Mary Ann Sheridan state in their book *Shape-Shifting: Images of Native Americans in Recent Popular Fiction*, that "*time and space are one*" (23), and that the "understanding of the unity of time and space is based upon a prior understanding of the unity of time itself and of space itself" (22). Furthermore, these narratives do not enclose a pre-established single conclusion, so as to allow

the reader to make his or her own inferences and change or adjust them to his or her standpoint in life; stories thus adapt themselves to the passing time. As a final point, and though weakened by contemporary urban lifestyle, Native American narrative is deeply embedded in the oral tradition, and the words of N. Scott Momaday (Kiowa) in the introduction to *The Way to Rainy Mountain* account for the significance of storytelling in American Indian oral tradition:

> There is a turning and returning of myth, history, and memoir throughout, a narrative wheel that is as sacred as language itself. It is appropriate that these discrete voices should be heard, that they should be read aloud, that they should remain, as they have always remained, alive at the level of the human voice. At that level their being is whole and essential. In the beginning was the word, and it was spoken. (Momaday ix)

Momaday epitomizes then the contemporary Native American need to convert the spoken word into a written one, and thus to preserve the undeniable importance of storytelling tradition in the process of the construction of personal identity. Pondering on the conversion itself and on its origin, Krupat brings to mind the metamorphosis of literature as "the medium of expression, writing—literature as culture preserved in letters—to the *kind* of expression preserved, literature as imaginative and affective utterance, spoken or written" (Krupat 34). Subsequently, "[i]t is only at this point that an oral literature can be conceived as other than a contradiction in terms and the unlettered Indians recognized as people capable of producing a 'literature'" (Krupat 34). Thus,

> it remains the case that an oral literature, in order to become the subject of analysis, must indeed first become an object. It must, that is, to be textualized; and here we encounter a translation dilemma of another kind, one in which the "source language" itself has to be carried across—*trans-latio*— from one medium to another . . . Words that had once existed only for the tongue to pronounce now were to be entrusted to the apprehension of the eye. (Krupat 34)

The question arises as to "whether something has been lost in the passage from the oral to the written form, whether the two share a common source, and what they share" (Coltelli 3). Loss is certainly undeniable — on the one hand it is due to the fact that the Native American spoken word gives way to the English

written word, that is, the spoken language of the colonised is subdued to the written language of the coloniser; and, on the other hand, it must be taken into consideration that each language has an indissoluble grammar, resultant reasoning and cultural thought. Furthermore, few Native American languages existed in a written form and, subsequently, the extension of potential readers would certainly be reduced. Conversely, the usage of English as a lingua franca is a means to convey Native American thought and cultural flows allowing non-Native readers to enter an American Indian world. However valuable the English language may be, it still presents a confined perception of language and some inadequacy to Native American thought, as Simon J. Ortiz (Acoma Pueblo) further clarifies in his essay "Song, Poetry, and Language—Expression and Perception": "we think of English as a very definitive language, useful in defining things—which means setting limits. But that's not what language is supposed to be. Language is not definition: Language is all expansive" (Moore 114). Nevertheless, coping with the passing time and its consequential changes leads us to N. Scott Momaday's words: "Native Americans themselves have changed, and must accommodate the modern world which has encircled them, at least in being able to communicate with it" (Macdonald, Macdonald, and Sheridan 285).

Language and its intimate connection with thought is Benjamin Lee Whorf's focus of interest. Whorf claims that "no individual is free to describe nature with absolute impartiality but is constrained to certain modes of interpretation even while he thinks himself most free" (Carroll 214); in point of fact, the person most likely to do so would be linguist with an extensive knowledge of different linguistic systems. However, bearing in mind that there is no linguist with such knowledge, Whorf considers that there is "a new principle of relativity, which holds that all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated" (Carroll 214). He furthermore declares that it takes more than comparing the modern European languages, for the reason that:

> [a]mong these tongues there is a unanimity of major pattern which at first seems to bear out natural logic. But this unanimity exists only because these tongues are all Indo-European dialects cut to the same basic plan, being historically transmitted from what was

> long ago one speech community; because the modern dialects have long shared in building up a common culture; and because much of this culture, on the more intellectual side, is derived from the linguistic backgrounds of Latin and Greek. (Carroll 214)

Thus, it is relevant to ponder over the dissimilarity that exists between the expressions “all modern Indo-European-speaking observers” and “all observers” (Carroll 214). The perception of the world differs greatly once

> we bring in the native languages of the Americas, where speech communities for many millenniums have gone their ways independently of each other and of the Old World, the fact that languages dissect nature in many different ways becomes patent. The relativity of all conceptual systems, ours included, and their dependence upon language stand revealed. That American Indians speaking only their native tongues are never called upon to act as scientific observers is in no wise to the point. (Carroll 214-215)

Communication is not exactly simple, as can be seen in the fact that representations of Native Americans have often induced Native and non-Native peoples alike to view North American indigenous peoples and cultures through the lenses of stereotypes. The extension of Native American misrepresentations is as wide in scope, ranging from advertising to cinema, and from schoolbooks to literature, as it is in time, considering that some of these preconceived ideas were introduced as early as the first English settlements in North America. In other words, “since the first encounters of precolonial times, Europeans have shaped, changed, and distorted the indigenous people to serve white people’s needs” (Macdonald, Macdonald, and Sheridan xi). À propos, Krupat draws attention to the fact that, “historical indigenousness is not the same as mythical autochthony: there is no *essence* of America that Native people automatically incarnate, just as there is no *essence* of Europe (or elsewhere) inherent in people or groups with near or distant ties to those places” (Krupat 5).

Still, the institutionalised conception of the “Indian” is “a conflation of hundreds of tribes, languages, and cultures into one emblematic figure: the Other, the Alien, the generalized Non-European” (Macdonald, Macdonald, and Sheridan xi). This leads to the subsequent annihilation of North American indigenous diversity, and it is further evidence of the lingering cultural genocide that has

ravaged Native Americans for centuries. The resulting loss is paradoxically irreversible and yet recoverable, as some traits and practices are forever lost, and others are undergoing a recovering process — an effort to cope with the past. In his essay "Looking for Columbus: Thoughts on the Past, Present and Future of Humanity", John Mohawk (Seneca) looks "Toward a Viable Future":

> For 500 years we have seen both a clashing and an intermixing of cultures. Over all but the last decade or so, America has espoused the ideology of "the melting pot," and yet that approach has failed to enrich this culture. So, we're beginning to arrive at the realization that we might have to adopt a more pluralistic approach; instead of requiring everybody to be the same, maybe we should learn to live with one another, and allow for a genuine multiplicity of cultures. We are living in a world in which difference is just a simple fact of life, but our collective thinking has yet to truly come to grips with this reality. This *has* to change. (Jaimes 442)

Most contemporary young Native Americans live an "interstitial experience", tackling the challenge of being an urban generation and yet bound to long-established indigenous lifestyles — "all know what it means to exist between two worlds, trying to belong to both" (64) declares MariJo Moore (Cherokee) in *Genocide of the Mind: New Native American Writing*. Living in liminality demands a continuous effort to cope with such a delicate in-between world; consequently, there are those young Native Americans who simply disregard the bond with their forebears' cultures, while others strive for a cultural equilibrium. Yet again, these young urban generations' role models are obscured by the stereotype of the "Indian" — this "Indian" is the outcome of the U.S. government-encouraged migration of Native people to urban centres, given that, according to the foreword by Vine Deloria, Jr. (Standing Rock Sioux), "American Indians [who] . . . came from small tribes . . . could not possibly produce enough people to form neighbourhoods where customs, rituals, and languages could be preserved. Instead, people from different tribes melded together and created a new social identification of 'Indian'" (Moore xii-xiii). Stereotypes also exist among Native communities living in reservations, but some already have programmes to overcome this problem. Rendering the Native American storytelling tradition

literary is a means to give voice to the indigenous cultures and beliefs which have undergone a process of decimation. Hence, literature by Native American writers provides an opportunity to perceive the past from a different angle and, ultimately, it is a path to perpetuate several ancient cultural flows and, therefore, to end the cultural genocide; it is an opportunity to make a difference.

First and foremost, victimisation should be avoided. Secondly, as the stereotype of the "Indian" still prevails in books, it is imperative to deconstruct this inaccurate and illusory representation of Native Americans. Thirdly, the introduction of non-stereotyped characters may establish a closer connection to reality. Fourthly, in order to subvert the state of affairs, the concept of "the Other" is introduced, disclosing a far-reaching approach of the "Indian" — the "Indian" becomes the narrator, and the "non-Indian" becomes the stranger. This Native American standpoint in narrative defies the established pre-conceptions of most readers, compelling them to perceive a somewhat uncommon thought structure that evolves in a circular time sequence and joins time and space in one same sphere. In addition, it categorically requires a certain level of abstraction and imagination.

Bearing in mind this literary course of action and Native American storytelling tradition, it is also important to assess books' reception by readers. Younger readers are far more impressionable than older ones, and are often overlooked in the study of the circulation of cultural material. Literature, moreover, has the potential to widen the range of the acceptance of cultural difference, due to the combination of the unlimited field of human imagination of readers with the rich field of cultural flows articulated by the writer. Nonetheless, in Yvonne Wakim (Cherokee), Paulette F. Molin (Ojibwe), and Arlene Hirschfelder's *American Indian Stereotypes in the World of Children: A Reader and Bibliography*, Mary Gloyne Byler sustains that "there are too many children's books about American Indians. . . . [whose majority] deal[s] with the unidentified past. The characters are from unidentified tribes and they are often not even afforded the courtesy of personal names. In fact, the only thing identifiable is the stereotyped image of the befeathered Indian" (47). What is more, "[a] number of authors [of books for children] have taken it upon themselves to establish the humanity of American

Indians by presenting arguments for and against the idea. Humanness is not an arguable point" (Hirschfelder, Molin and Wakim 50). Finally, "[o]nce again, it is the space of intervention emerging in the cultural interstices that introduces creative invention into existence" (Bhabha 9).

Literature for children and adolescents is valuable both to Native American and non-Native American readers as an educational resource for contemporary and future generations. For Native American readers with strong bonds to the Native community, it is an opportunity to strengthen and deepen their knowledge of their ancestors' culture; for those readers whose bonds with the Native community are fragile or non-existent, it is a way to acknowledge and familiarise themselves with their forebears' culture; and for non-Native American readers, it aids in becoming aware of and familiarised with the existing North American indigenous peoples and their cultural characteristics. The role of literature for children and adolescents may then be perceived through the words of Homi Bhabha:

> The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The 'past-present' becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living. (Bhabha 7)

The question then is to seize children's attention and capture them through literature. In this light, it is interesting to read the following statement regarding the abduction of children in the early days of the colonies in North America and ironically testifying to the power of education: "[t]hose who somehow were eventually returned to their homes were never the same; their perspectives had changed, and the younger they were when captured and the longer they stayed, the more they had assimilated to the way of their captors and the harder it was to return comfortably to their former communities" (Macdonald, Macdonald, and Sheridan 5). Indeed, a book may capture a child and become his or her refuge, as H. Lee Karalis (Chahta), a Native American raised in the city, gives testimony to in "A Different Rhythm",

> I grew up loving the written word and the worlds each word opened for me. Books. I devoured them. I would hide in them because I didn't seem to fit in with the real world around me. Nobody understood. Not even me. . . . I see the words on the page and they comfort me because the written word has always comforted me, given me a place to go without being judged. (Moore 173-175)

Stories in books can ensnare a passion for literature, and stories once told aloud may activate memory and old mechanisms; the latter embody old traditions and the spirit of people and peoples. In "We, the People: Young American Indians Reclaiming Their Identity", Lee Francis (Laguna Pueblo) shares urban Native American students' feedback in class: "[t]hey remember the ancient stories. They remember the stories of the past and tell them. And they interweave the lessons in stories of the past as they begin to tell story about the present and the future. In the process of remembering and telling, they discover their core identity" (Moore 83). Here lies the essence of storytelling tradition — telling a story, receiving a story, processing a story; which implies an active relationship with what one is exposed to. In conclusion, Patricia Riley (Cherokee) states that:

> [t]he languages and oral traditions of Native American peoples have carried the thoughts and beliefs of their ancestors forward to their descendants in contemporary America. Passed from generation to generation through storytelling, oral traditions represent living libraries containing thousands of years of knowledge and history about the world and how to be in it. (Riley 28)

At last, attention should be drawn to Michael Dorris and Louise Erdrich themselves. Michael Anthony Dorris (Modoc, 1945-1997) received his degree of Master of Philosophy in 1970 from Yale University and, in 1972, he became the first Chairman of Native American Studies at Dartmouth College. His work reveals his sensitivity and deep interest in Native American peoples in his work of non-fiction and fiction, in books for children and novels for adults, in prose and poetry. Karen Louise Erdrich (Anishinabe, 1954-) received her degree of Master of Arts in creative writing in 1979 from John Hopkins University. Her Native American

heritage is mirrored in her fiction for adults and children. She has also written poetry and non-fiction. Along with Dorris's work, Erdrich's work is highly thought of and has been given several awards.

The chapters that follow will analyse: firstly, Michael Dorris's young adult novels, namely: *Morning Girl*, *Guests*, and *Sees Behind Trees*; secondly, Louise Erdrich's sequential historical novels: *The Birchbark House* and *The Game of Silence*; thirdly, Dorris and Erdrich's work will be set alongside each other, and, eventually, conclusions will be reached with respect to the nature and value of Dorris and Erdrich's books for younger readers.

2. Analysis of Michael Dorris's Young Adult Novels: *Morning Girl*, *Sees Behind Trees* and *Guests*

. . . an unabashed invitation to children and adults alike: open yourself up to imagination, give in to fantasy, don't protect yourself from vicarious emotion, whether joyful or tragic. Reading anything that moves you, disturbs you, thrills you is a path into the great swirl of humanity, past, present, and future. (Dorris and Buchwald, xiv)
Michael Dorris

2.1 Michael Dorris and His Writing

Michael Dorris was a distinguished scholar and a prolific writer. In academia, Dorris's education consisted of diverse fields of study, namely English and classics, theatre, and anthropology. His Native North American ancestry is visible throughout his oeuvre which comprises long and short fiction, non-fiction, numerous articles and essays for both scholarly and non-scholarly publications, poetry, book reviews, songs, and screen treatments. In the *Handbook of Native American Literature*, Barbara K. Robins (Cherokee) states that, "Dorris has become significant to the field of Native American literature through his anthropological writings concerning the well-being of contemporary Native American culture groups, Native American history, and social concerns, and for his contributions to contemporary fiction" (Wiget 417).

In his 1979 proposal to the Faculty Development Competition at Dartmouth College, Dorris delineates one of his fundamental areas of study with later reflections on his fictional and non-fictional writing:

> [o]ne of the most crucial, and most interesting, areas of research within anthropology and Native American studies is the event and subsequent history of contact between European and indigenous peoples. Germinal in the initial moment of mutual discovery are a plethora of later confusions, misapprehensions and assumptions. The shock of awareness that cultures of human beings substantially different from one's own can be simultaneously traumatic and exhilarating, frightening and expanding. It forces both sides to re-examine and perhaps re-assess previous definitions and notions about themselves and the world, and to begin to forge a new identity for themselves vis-à-vis each other. (Dorris "Proposal" Page One)

In the collection of writings and photographs *Native Americans: 500 Years After*, in which the texts are of Dorris's authorship, attention is drawn not only to the first contacts established between European voyagers and the indigenous peoples of the Western Hemisphere, but also to their outcome. Moreover, the aforementioned moments are given the perspective of each involved party: on the one hand, for the indigenous peoples of the Americas, "[t]he diversity of human society was an accepted, expected fact of life and considered to be the normal state of affairs" (Dorris *Native Americans* 2); thus, in a shared common ground, there was room "for difference, and destiny was thought to manifest itself on an individual rather than a societal plane" (Dorris *Native Americans* 2). On the other hand, Europeans were mystified by Native Americans and, "[t]o their horror and dismay[,] they found that their 'New World' was thoroughly inhabited by people who not only did not *understand* long-standing European mores of political, social, and religious behaviour, but seemed downright uninterested in these conventions" (Dorris *Native Americans* 4). Subsequently, at the outset of a new age, long before the creation of the melting pot metaphor, Europeans *melted* the indigenous peoples of the Western Hemisphere into the conceptualized *Indian* and created a myth.

At the end of the twentieth century Dorris held that: "[f]or most people, the myth has become real and a preferred substitute for reality. The Indian mystique was designed for mass consumption by a European audience, the fulfilment of old and deep-seated expectations for 'the Other'" (*Paper Trail* 124). This statement is part of Dorris's article "Indians on the Shelf", which, according to Robins, is his "most succinct and controlled effort on a theme he frequently addresses: the distorted image of Native Americans as the result of mythologizing by Western European culture" (Wiget 419). Dorris further sustains that, "[i]n many respects living Native Americans remain . . . mysterious, exotic, and unfathomable to their contemporaries" (*Paper Trail* 126-127), and, what is more, "[s]ince the whys and wherefores of Native American society are not easily accessible to those culture-bound by Western traditional values, there is a tendency to assume that Indians are creatures of either instinct or whimsy" (*Paper Trail* 127). In a blunt register, he concludes:

> If the only two stipulated givens are that Indian societies were composed of people in the normal range of human intelligence and that human beings, wherever and whenever they may live, share some traits, then we can dare, once having amassed and digested all the data available from usual sources, to imagine the world through the eyes of our historical subjects. We can attempt to make sense of practices, beliefs, and reactions that do not conform to a Western model but must, within the configurations of their own contexts, have some explanation. We can stop treating Indians as sacred European myths and begin the terribly difficult and unpredictable task of belatedly and permanently taking them off the shelf. (*Paper Trail* 132)

In a similar style, Dorris conveys his yearning to change the long institutionalized mindset on Native Americans, as observable in the foreword to the first edition of Hirschfelder, Molin, and Wakim's *American Indian Stereotypes in the World of Children*: "[f]rozen in a kind of pejorative past tense, these make-believe Indians are not allowed to change or in any other way be like *real* people. They are denied the dignity and dynamism of their history, the validity of their myriad and major contributions to modern society, the distinctiveness of their multiple ethnicities" (vii). He further brings to mind the fact that, "[i]n the vast majority of these [several hundred separate cultures of North America] societies, power and decision-making rested with both women and men" (Hirschfelder, Molin and Wakim vii-viii), and that "[a] wide variety of sciences . . . were highly developed and practiced. A wealth of spiritual and philosophical beliefs flourished. A tolerance for individual difference, either within one's own culture or in another society altogether, was the norm" (Hirschfelder, Molin and Wakim viii). Hence, the aforementioned notion of an existing "pluralism of social experimentation" (Hirschfelder, Molin and Wakim vii) is once more affirmed.

Dorris's will to deconstruct the stereotyped Indian and "present Native Americans as individuals" (Chavkin and Chavkin 198) is manifest throughout his fiction and non-fiction. In his essay "The Grass Still Grows, the Rivers Still Flow: Contemporary Native Americans", the author declares that, "[i]n general, cultural interactions take place on at least two levels, the imaginary and the real. . . . In this realm of heightened meaning . . . individual people are nowhere to be found" (*Paper Trail* 169). Being a writer provides him with a means to convey his

standpoint: “[w]hen you write you should attempt to say something that, in a sense, collapses your experience and makes it available for somebody else without them having to have lived that particular thing. That opportunity is a privilege, but it is also a responsibility” (Chavkin and Chavkin 191), Dorris declares in an interview conducted by Allan and Nancy Chavkin in *Conversations with Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris*. In addition, when questioned on the idea of analysing social issues in fiction, Dorris conveys his preference for “doing the explicit examination of social issues in non-fiction” (Chavkin and Chavkin 191), alleging that “if the social issue is compelling enough, it will break through the whole work rather than in a kind of didactic statement” (Chavkin and Chavkin 191). Dorris further sustains that difference in writing resides not in technique but in “the complexity of human relationships” (Chavkin and Chavkin 194) and that, for this reason, “the most unobtrusive technique possible” should be used so that “no word jars you out of your absorption in the story” (Chavkin and Chavkin 194).

2.2 Dorris’s Writing for Younger Readers

Michael Dorris’s first incursion into the world of literature for younger readers is revealed in a brief article entitled “Writing for Children”: “[a]s with so many significant doors in the house of my life, I entered the room of writing for young readers… backwards” (Amoss and Suben 101). Nonetheless, such an entrance did not prevent Dorris from continuing this kind of writing. In point of fact, pondering on his writing for children in an article by Maureen Conlan, Dorris declares that the main difference between writing for children and for adults rests on the fact that the former have a narrower range of vocabulary and imagery than the latter (Conlan 12b). What is more, in an article by Stephanie Loer, Dorris acknowledges that “[w]riting for children takes tremendous discipline” (Loer 33), for the reason that clarity of language is required in stories for younger readers. Furthermore, considering that “[i]n Native American stories there is always a lesson and real respect for the individual” (Loer 33), Dorris expresses his wish “to share these stories with children of all cultures” (Loer 33). Dorris believes that

eventually, through the “writing [of] books for children, [he] can help change some misconceptions about Native American kids and culture” (Loer 33). As Kathy Kerner recalls in her text “The Thanksgiving Epidemic”: “[m]isconceptions about Native people depend on stereotypes that are pervasive in popular culture. Many . . . are transmitted through the ‘educational’ content . . . These fixed images then become part of the cultural air we breathe—accepted by mainstream society without question, and exist without our even being aware of them” (Hirschfelder, Molin and Wakim 235). Consequently, it is essential to reverse the trend and, through the literary world of younger readers, undo the stereotypes of the Native American peoples.

Pondering on the implications of rewriting history, Dorris advocates that creative imagination is a valid approach to extinguishing stereotypes; he moreover believes that it is amongst children that the process is the most likely to be successful, given that “[y]oung minds are not yet schooled to screen out paradox, not yet programmed to gauge significance on the basis of establishment imprimatur, not yet fixed with absolute judgements” (*Paper Trail* 138). However, more often than not, the presentation of “the non-Western world to young readers or listeners” falls into existing moulds and the outcome is counterproductive (*Paper Trail* 139). Despite the usage of a multicultural politically correct vocabulary, well-intentioned books are liable to present tedious storybook Indians (*Paper Trail* 139); what is more, “for a writer, good intentions can be dangerous, even lethal, because they tend to subvert the business of telling a story” (*Paper Trail* 141-142). Dorris also declares that, notwithstanding the effort of parents and teachers to allow children to know other cultural flows, it is fundamental to bear in mind that: “Indian children in fiction must be children as much as they are Indian, for without some primal sense of identification, some attraction toward vicarious emotion, some invitation to shared imagination that spans all the obvious points of distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ what began as merely foreign winds up as dutiful, even forbidding” (*Paper Trail* 140-141).

2.3 Dorris’s Young Adult Novels and Their Analysis

2.3.1 Introduction

Along these lines, Michael Dorris's contribution to the literary world of younger readers left a noteworthy imprint in the deconstruction of the stereotypical images of native peoples of the Americas. His young adult fiction comprises four books — *Morning Girl* (1992), *Guests* (1994), *Sees Behind Trees* (1996) and *The Window* (1997). Whilst the latter is a contemporary narrative of the life of a part African-American, part Native American girl, Rayona, who featured initially in Dorris's novel *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* (1987), the former three are historical novels which depict Native American peoples' everyday life and their early contact with Europeans. *Morning Girl* portrays the life of two Taíno siblings in the week prior to their first contact with Europeans and it was first published in the year of the commemoration of the quincentenary of Columbus's arrival in the American continent; *Sees Behind Trees* describes the relationship established between an adolescent boy and a revered old man in their Powhatan community at the time around the foundation of Jamestown; *Guests* takes place in what is now New England and narrates a day in the life of a Wampanoag adolescent boy, the day of the mythic celebration of the First Thanksgiving. Nonetheless, it must be added that, with the exception of *Morning Girl*, these dates are not evident to the reader. Taking into consideration the historical line of reasoning established by Dorris's three first published works of young adult fiction, and the relevance of *The Window* notwithstanding, this dissertation will focus its analysis on *Morning Girl*, *Sees Behind Trees* and *Guests*. For practical purposes, quotations from these narratives will be referred to as *MG*, *SBT* and *G* respectively.

2.3.2 Dorris's Standpoint in the Writing of His Young Adult Novels

Contrasting with the conventional Eurocentric perspective, Michael Dorris's cultural inheritance establishes the premises of a diametrically opposed perspective of widely celebrated moments of the United States' history, particularly the discovery of America, the first official English settlement in the New World and the celebration of the First Thanksgiving. As a consequence, *Morning Girl*, *Sees Behind Trees* and *Guests* present a Native American point of view to the reader.

At the historical moments aforementioned and believing the presence of Europeans to be trustworthy, Native Americans received the newcomers mostly as guests and treated them "as trading partners, and, to a certain extent, as curiosities" (Dorris *Native Americans* 4). Taking the Powhatan and Wampanoag peoples into consideration, it is observed in the *Guide to Research on North American Indians* that, "[i]n almost every instance, the first arrivals to North America were received with kindness and hospitality. The Wampanoags' principal chief, Massasoit, and the principal chief of the Virginia Indians, Powhatan, offered food and shelter and instruction in how to survive in the North American environment. Both men maintained peace with the white colonists until they died" (Hirschfelder, Byler and Dorris 109-110).

With reference to *Morning Girl*, Dorris acknowledges that it was "the virtual anonymity of the Taíno" (*Paper Trail* 141) which led him to write the novel. At the time of the official celebrations of the quincentenary of Columbus voyage to the Western Hemisphere, "the Taíno are sketchily approachable through archaeology, through analogy with other small hunting and gathering groups, and through the journal entries of Christopher Columbus himself" (*Paper Trail* 137). In the case of Columbus, Dorris warns that, "a conscientious reader must filter out ethnocentrism to find dependable data lodged within a cloud of opinion" (*Paper Trail* 137). The writer furthermore considers that the Taíno's experience set the precedent for the experience of almost every native people of the Americas (*Paper Trail* 141); hence, Dorris's decision to give them not only faces, voices, and personalities, but also "made-up stories, so long as they don't violate or exist outside the perimeters of objective truth" (*Paper Trail* 138). Subsequently, Dorris "invite[s] onto the page [Morning Girl and Star Boy,] two fully invested children—curious, independent, self-analytical, strong, moving toward independence—whose flaws were the flaws of youth: redeemable with wisdom and maturity. They are not brilliant or precocious, but merely normal, typical" (*Paper Trail* 143). Hence, the lives of these siblings in the week prior to the arrival of Columbus to the continent are shared with the reader.

À propos of the writing of *Morning Girl*, Dorris acknowledges that, based on his writing of adult novels, narration is made by a first-person narrator — as stated above. Taking into consideration his prior knowledge of the Taíno, Dorris imagines "a place and a time very remote from [his] own experience, a world that was infinitely smaller, safer, and consequently had the illusion of being better understood and more trusted by its inhabitants" (*Paper Trail* 142). He further states that "[i]f the suspension of disbelief were done well, the story should be accessible to younger readers and listeners" (*Paper Trail* 142). Nevertheless, Dorris brings to mind the fact that "[w]e can only draw with authenticity upon emotions we've known and tasted" (*Paper Trail* 142). In these ways, *Morning Girl* sets the pattern for the ensuing historical novels.

Considering the Powhatan people and the writing of *Sees Behind Trees*, Dorris expresses his acknowledgment to Helen Rountree, whose book *The Powhatan Indians of Virginia: Their Traditional Culture* presented a valuable source of information for his work. Rountree's book is "intended as a historical ethnography, that is, a description of a culture of the past based on historical documents. Specifically, it is a time capsule datable to 1607-10" (Rountree vii). Once again, Dorris's anthropological vein sets the basis for his fiction. Pondering also on the Powhatan people and the newly landed English people, Frederic Wright Gleach enlightens, in *Powhatan's World and Colonial Virginia: A Conflict of Cultures*, that the latter "were a small group of poorly supplied men dependent on the native population for their survival" (Gleach 2), and that the former were, "local natives, a confederation of Algonquian-speaking tribes known as the Powhatans and led by the paramount chief Powhatan, [who] had prior experience with Europeans" (Gleach 2). Gleach further clarifies that "[d]uring the early years of the colony the Powhatans and the English made mutual attempts to civilize each other. Through actions which were largely misunderstood by the other group, each group initially sought to demonstrate to the other its superiority in the relationship and to persuade the other to adopt 'appropriate' ways of living" (Gleach 3).

In *Sees Behind Trees*, in the historical novel per se, Dorris intertwines the life-circles of two Powhatan men with permanent physical disabilities, and whereas

the youngest has just officially entered adulthood, the oldest is a long-time revered person in the community. It is during the challenge of their people's rite of passage to enter adult life that their lives connect. The contest which Walnut, the short-sighted adolescent boy, enters is exceptionally demanding since, before the regular demonstration of being proficient at shooting an arrow and hitting the target, a special stage is created and participants are required to "do the impossible [and] see what can't be seen" (*SBT* 9-10). Walnut, whose perception of the world is only a "mist of color and noise" (*SBT* 3), tackles this first task confidently for he has been under intensive training; therefore, employing his alert senses, he looks with his ears (*SBT* 5) and, at a considerable distance, he unmistakeably recognises Gray Fire, the approaching old man whose walk has a characteristic slight limp. At this point, the significance of this particular change in a revered ceremony does not seem to be evident to the protagonist or to the reader, but it certainly is noticeable that this manoeuvre converts the boy's disability and probable public failure into a moment of unquestionable success before the eyes of his peers and the community, that is, an approach to coping with difference and its acceptance through praise of his abilities and downplaying of his disability. This ceremony is presided over by Otter, the weroance; hence, due to her acknowledged importance in the community, she declares: "[w]hen a boy passes the test he is no longer a boy . . . He no longer wears a boy's name" (*SBT* 12); thus, Walnut becomes a young man who goes by the name of Sees Behind Trees (*SBT* 12).

Lastly, in *Guests*, Dorris offers the perspective of the Wampanoag people at the time of the mythic First Thanksgiving. Dorris researched not only the place but also the people — "the kind of kinship, clothes they wore, flora and fauna of the Cape Cod area" (Conlan 12b). In the aforementioned article by Stephanie Loer, Dorris declares that he "was determined to portray the Wampanoags' life; to show what was important to the tribe before the settlers arrived. It could not be a story of Native Americans after the influence of the Europeans. Then the Indians become the reactors instead of the actors" (Loer 33). In "There Are Many Thanksgiving

Stories to Tell", the introduction to *Teaching About Thanksgiving*, Chuck Larsen (Métis/Ojibwe/Seneca) clarifies:

> Our contemporary mix of myth and history about the "First" Thanksgiving at Plymouth developed in the 1890s and early 1900s. Our country was desperately trying to pull together its many diverse peoples into a common national identity. To many writers and educators at the end of the last century and the beginning of this one [twentieth century], this also meant having a common national history. This was the era of the "melting pot" theory of social progress, and public education was a major tool for social unity. It was with this in mind that the federal government declared the last Thursday in November as the legal holiday of Thanksgiving in 1898. (Seale, Slapin and Silverman 51)

Guests is centrally a story about storytelling and, from its outset, two stories intertwine. Firstly, a story is lost at dawn. Moss, disregarding the community's prohibition, is playing with "a string of old wampum" (*G* 1) when it suddenly splits "scattering beads on the ground" (*G* 1). This is a matter of great concern, considering that the design of the wampum belt holds "a story from long ago" (*G* 2). Moreover, these "belts were important things, taken out and passed around by old people on special occasions" (*G* 1). Despite Moss's intention to repair the belt, it is doomed to failure, because if a single bead is misplaced the wampum belt's design alters and so does the story; as Moss's grandfather then acknowledges, the beads "are once again just carved shells" (*G* 3). Thus, according to tradition, Moss is held responsible for finding a new story for the wampum. This incident occurs at the beginning of a special day for the Wampanoag, the celebration of the Harvest Feast. Set in the autumn, this special meal is the "final taste of summer before we had to remember the length of the coming winter and eat only in small portions" (*G* 21) and it marks the end of a year and the beginning of another; ultimately, it is "the bridge in-between them" (*G* 10). This feast differs from the previous ones, however, given that, this time, guests have been invited to share the meal and participate in such an old tradition. Moss feels strongly opposed to the presence of guests and his angry mood mirrors his spirit. As for the guests, for most of the narrative, they are mainly the origin of Moss's hostile reaction and it is only when the time comes to enjoy the Harvest Feast that they play an active role. As he strives to stand against such an alteration, Moss wishes nothing would ever

change — "I wanted this year to be just like last year and the year before that, as far back as I could remember" (*G* 15). This is the onset of the second story in *Guests*: Moss's refusal to welcome guests at the harvest feast and his subsequent decision to leave home and go on his away time.

2.3.3 Narration

First-person narration is a trait of Dorris's fiction. Acknowledging that it is difficult for him "to write in the third person, to be an omniscient narrator" (Chavkin and Chavkin 192), he reveals that "when you do first-person narrators you have this wonderful ability to get into people's interior monologues" (Chavkin and Chavkin 203). À propos of *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water*, Dorris sustains that giving voice to these interior speeches discloses Native North Americans' own voice, hence "they can be whoever they are, and express any complex thought or emotion" without being muted by their ability in the English language; as a consequence, the stereotype of the laconic Indian is nullified. Thus, "what may appear to other non-Indians as magical realism or art is in fact the style of people who are primarily oral, and who are part of an oral rather than a literate culture that values creating stories and dialogue and ideas—making stories out of things" (Chavkin and Chavkin 203). Moreover, Dorris understands his fiction to be "fairly realistic. Part of that realism is not to have everything be neat" (Chavkin and Chavkin 214), in view of the fact that first-person narrators are inherently non-omniscient.

The narration of Dorris's three historical novels for younger readers rests on the voice of a first-person narrator: the protagonist in each narrative. Pondering on the protagonists themselves in general, and on *Morning Girl* in particular, it is noteworthy that in this book the first-person narrator alternates between Morning Girl and Star Boy, two siblings living on the island that witnesses the arrival of Columbus's fleet; the narrator of the epilogue, however, is Columbus, in a letter addressed to the Spanish King and Queen. Even though the title focuses the reader's attention on Morning Girl, her younger brother's voice is almost as active as hers. With reference to *Sees Behind Trees*, the protagonist is Walnut, a short-sighted Powhatan adolescent boy, who becomes Sees Behind Trees in his

people's rite of passage for boys to enter adult life and, hence, is challenged to live up to his new name. Both Walnut and Morning Girl are the eldest children of the family. On the other hand, the protagonist of *Guests* is the only child left in his family, for Moss is "the only one of [the] children who had not fallen ill with the coughing sickness" (*G* 13). Additionally, there is a semi-protagonist in *Guests* — Trouble, a Wampanoag adolescent girl with whom Moss shares the adventure of going on away time, but whose voice is heard only through Moss's narration.

2.3.4 The Importance of Names

Naming is a matter of great importance within Native American cultures. Each name has a special meaning and, consequently, it carries in itself a certain degree of both power and responsibility. Each Native American people has its own traditions when it comes to naming: names are given during infancy; later, at the reach of puberty, they are likely to change after a vision quest or a designed set of tests. Yet, despite the different traditions, the naming ceremony is common amongst Native American cultures, in which it is believed that there exists a special bond between the name and its holder. The three stories here under analysis do not depart from this perception.

In *Morning Girl* the names of its two narrators speak for themselves. On the one hand, Morning Girl's name reflects the fact that she always awakes at daybreak; she not only enjoys the solitude of the early morning, but also believes that "if the day starts before you do, you never catch up. . . . The day wins" (*MG* 2). On the other hand, Star Boy enjoys "darkness best, especially when there are no clouds and no moon" (*MG* 2) allowing him to observe "the white sand scattered on the sky's black beach" (*MG* 10) and, what is more, he may look down on the stars as if he were a bat. According to him, bats like the dark, "[b]ecause there are special things to see if you watch closely. Because in it you can be dreaming even if you're awake. Because someone must remember the day while others sleep and call it when it's time for the sun to come home" (*MG* 12). Star Boy's name is first uttered by his father Speaks to Birds, as he explains: "[b]efore that I was called 'Hungry' because that's what I was most of the time. I liked 'Star Boy' much better. No one spoke as we all listened, tested the weight of the words" (*MG* 11).

At the time that the small Taíno community gathers to celebrate being alive after the hurricane, only Star Boy's family acknowledges and knows him by his new name, to others he is still known as Hungry. In fact, considering his behaviour at the feast, his old name seems to suit him better, for the reason that feeling confident of himself, Star Boy decides to run past the several family mats taking food at random; observing her brother's behaviour, and considering what counts as appropriate and inappropriate behaviour, Morning Girl remembers "when I could run free, not worrying that I might appear foolish" (*MG* 49). Sharp Tooth remarks that his nephew's conduct is inappropriate and Star Boy suddenly also realises it; therefore, the boy turns to his sister for help and, according to Morning Girl, their perception of the surrounding world at that moment is almost non-existent: "Star Boy and I reached across the space between us" (*MG* 50); hence, supporting her brother, Morning Girl decides to imitate him and, in a gesture of solidarity, so does the rest of their family. Nonetheless, Star Boy's early name, Hungry, will not be erased from people's memory, but they will listen for who he has become (*MG* 52); Star Boy "would remember that he was now older, that he could no longer behave as a child. *If your name is true, it is who you are*" (*MG* 52-53) [my italics]. Moreover, "[n]ames are strange and special gifts. There are names you give to yourself and names you show to the world, names that stay for a short while and names that remain with you forever, names that come from things you do and names that you receive as presents from other people" (*MG* 52). Just before leaving the feast, Star Boy briefly and discreetly calls his older sister "the name he would always afterward use when we were alone together" (*MG* 53) — "The One Who Stands Beside". It is a quiet meaningful moment of truce between Morning Girl and Star Boy, not only acknowledging each other's presence, but also showing mutual respect for one another, thus strengthening the family ties.

In the meantime the coming of a new baby has been announced. Subsequently, She Wins the Race points out to her daughter the importance of naming the new baby sister once she is born, as she explains, "[s]he's not a real person until she has a name, not a human being, not your sister or my daughter. After she comes into the world we have to decide right away who she is" (*MG* 16). So, eager to find a name for the new sister, Morning Girl suggests that her father

do it; but he reminds her that “the right name” (*MG* 18) comes with time, “[p]eople choose their own name, or it chooses them”(*MG* 18). However, She Wins the Race has a miscarriage and, consequently, the idea of a name for the new baby is set aside, except by Morning Girl. From her viewpoint, it is not correct that her sister “had received no name” (*MG* 67) and, on one occasion, she realises: “*I* could give the new sister a name, just between her and me. I . . . found exactly the right one: She Listens. Now she was real” (*MG* 67). Naming the sister she wishes she would have had, Morning Girl creates an entity that fills the void of a missing sibling and becomes a secret friend that keeps her company, always there to listen to her mind.

For Sees Behind Trees, internalising his new name reveals itself to be somewhat difficult, for the reason that, having finally received a man’s name, at “the end of the day every boy in the village was someone new—and yet we were also still the same we had been” (*SBT* 13). Later, the boy’s special skill of “seeing behind trees” determines that Gray Fire chooses him to accompany him on a special expedition: the old man’s lifetime search for a land of water.

In *Guests* Moss’s grandmother clarifies that “[a] name reminds, it doesn’t describe. It can be the opposite of truth, or something in between” (*G* 23). According to her, Moss was given that name, “[b]ecause it would have been unkind to call you Crybaby” (*G* 24); still, the boy explains that, “when I was a baby I wanted to be next to my mother all the time. . . . as close to her as a moss to a rock” (*G* 14). As far as Trouble is concerned, “[w]hen she was small she had never cried . . . She was so easy [her parents] could afford to give her a difficult name” (*G* 23). Bearing these reasons in mind, and pondering on the behaviour of both teenagers throughout the narrative, Dorris clearly reverses the depiction of gender. That is, if the adolescent boy and girl’s names were switched, they would fit into the existing gender stereotypes: wouldn’t it be more likely to name a boy Trouble and a girl Moss?

Subsequent to Moss and Trouble’s away time, new names should emerge. Feeling puzzled about the process and taking into consideration that “a new name didn’t always come right away. Sometimes a person had to figure out what had happened to him first” (*G* 85), Moss is named by Trouble and Thunder is the given

name (*G* 85). Pondering on this, Moss assumes: “I couldn’t pretend to have a name that wasn’t mine—which was too bad, because I liked Thunder quite a bit. It was just the kind of serious name I wanted for myself” (*G* 86).

2.3.5 Loneliness and Solitude

The narrators of *Morning Girl* regard two particularly sensitive issues rather differently from other children: on the one hand, Morning Girl takes pleasure in the solitude of the early morning and, on the other, Star Boy feels comfortable in the darkness that allows him to enjoy “a night when there’s no moon and you look straight into the sky” (*MG* 8). Nonetheless, Star Boy’s perception of darkness divides itself into two different categories: whereas the first is a partial darkness, in which he feels comfortably safe, the second is total darkness, which makes him feel rather uneasy, since it feels like a void. As a matter of fact, Star Boy recalls, “[t]he first night I woke up and noticed that everyone was invisible, I held perfectly still and disappeared. I became nothing, too, and didn’t know how to get back. Finally I talked to myself . . . I touched my tongue to my lips and tasted the salt from the ocean, and I waited . . . until the day remembered us, and returned” (*MG* 8-9).

Loneliness overcomes Star Boy once again. At the end of a particularly difficult day, which included several divergences (first with his best friend Red Feathers, next with his father and lastly with his older sister), feeling deeply ashamed of his behaviour and avoiding facing his uncomfortable reality, Star Boy blends with the night’s blackness, thus becoming invisible. At long last, he feels alone, “[e]xcept not really alone: I was still with myself. . . . I wished the wind . . . carried me anywhere, anywhere but where I was” (*MG* 58). Hence, Star Boy becomes conscious of himself and believes that fleeing from reality is the easiest solution; then, he allows fear to take over him, fear of the night and its darkness. Eventually, after blending with darkness, Star Boy becomes it; then, gradually, as the anger leaves him, he becomes himself. In his words,

> When I had nothing else to think of, I simply let the air wash over me. I became the darkness. I listened to my breath as it ran in and out of my mouth like tides on the beach. I put my hands flat on the sand and felt the smoothness against my palms. I sniffed the air,

> got to know this great, wide house, because I didn't know how long I would have to live in it. And, without my ever noticing the change, I stopped being mad. I became myself. (*MG* 60)

Consequently, at the end of the experience, Star Boy acknowledges before his mother that "at night you must be your own friend" (*MG* 61).

Taking Sees Behind Trees's short-sightedness into consideration, loneliness is seen from an unusual angle, the one in which the lack of sharp sight delineates the physical space where the feeling of companionship ends and the feeling of loneliness starts with light, during the day. In fact, in his reflections, particularly those on solitude, Sees Behind Trees comes to the conclusion that, "[w]ithout somebody to be somebody to, it was as though I wasn't somebody myself" (*SBT* 29). It is his best friend Three Chances that later helps him clarify his standpoint: "You only feel that way because your eyes are weak . . . you get alone faster than other people. . . . Your alone space is smaller. . . . Anything beyond that and to your eyes it might as well not be there" (*SBT* 29). Conversely, in order to surmount his short-sightedness, Sees Behind Trees's other senses are acutely developed and manifest their capacity at the fullest in the darkness, during the night; as a consequence, he feels less lonely in the dark, for "[a]t night *I* could see as far as I could throw a rock" (*SBT* 30). In effect, Sees Behind Trees differs from most people who have good sight — they feel lonely at dissimilar times.

Loneliness is also the feeling that drives Gray Fire and Otter's relationship in *Sees Behind Trees*. Being twins they have a special bond, "even when we were not touching we were never far apart" (*SBT* 96). Growing up, Otter comes to be recognised as a hunter and Gray Fire as a runner and then, one day, Otter observes, for "[t]he first time . . . Gray Fire kept going beyond the point I could match his endurance, aloneness dropped over me, wrapped around me . . . Half of myself was suddenly gone" (*SBT* 98). Therefore, finding it too difficult to cope with aloneness, Otter "decided to change things back to the way they had been" (*SBT* 98) and sets a trap for her twin brother; in her words, "[a] good hunter knows many ways to snare. . . . But the most clever trap of all is the one that does not kill, that only holds the prey until the hunter comes to claim the prize" (*SBT* 100). Unexpectedly, the prize is sadly high. Otter attracts her brother to an especially

impressive place, a land of water, where, swept away by its beauty, Gray Fire gets his foot stuck between two curved rocks, “[i]t had been swallowed by the spirit of the place” (*SBT* 42). As stated by Otter: “I planned, *of course*, to go to Gray Fire’s aid. . . . But I made a mistake. . . . I had underestimated my brother’s love for me. . . . Gray Fire did not wait for me to release him—he came when I called” [my italics] (*SBT* 100). In order to meet her swiftly, Gray Fire’s response to his sister’s calling is drastic: only one solution occurs to him and he decides to act accordingly: he cuts off his two trapped toes. In the end, Otter’s fear of loneliness and selfish perspective that life should flow according to her mind lead to incompleteness and frustration; in her words: “[a]fter that day, he could no longer run away from me, it’s true, but he didn’t come back the person he once had been. A part of him, the part, I realized too late, that I loved best, remained in the land of water, waiting, drawing him back each night in his sleep” (*SBT* 100).

In *Guests*, it is the forest that sets the manner through which the two adolescents perceive solitude and loneliness. For Trouble the forest is a non-intimidating, rather familiar place, the space she seeks to be alone, because she finds it pleasurable and enjoys solitude. For Moss, on the contrary, the forest presents itself as an unfamiliar and somewhat threatening place where he is alone and feels lonely — a rather painful experience.

2.3.6 The Relevance of Nature and the Senses

Nature plays a relevant role in the three analysed storylines. In their communities, the protagonists are taught to merge into nature, insofar as such a thing is possible, and blend with the world around them. This symbiosis between human beings and nature is fundamental to preserving the balance between both sides by conveying the essential knowledge to survive and, in this way, preserving life.

In *Morning Girl*, an episode in Star Boy’s life illustrates the close relationship between humans and nature. Once Star Boy decides to play with his father’s canoe but lets it adrift. Unable to solve the situation, conscious of its gravity and avoiding facing reality, he hides in the rocks by becoming one of them: “I made myself look like a rock and didn’t move. I shut my eyes, stopped breathing” (*MG*

23). Considering he has become a rock, he believes every other being would also perceive him as one, and indeed this comes to be confirmed when his elder sister looks for him but fails to find him "because she was searching for a human boy . . . not for a stone" (*MG* 24). Putting great effort into being a rock, Star Boy rejoices at being one because he may set his human needs aside, but, before long, his guilty conscience weighs on him. Next, comes his mother and, according to Star Boy, "[i]t was strange to watch my mother when she didn't know I was there, so strange that I almost forgot my mother was my mother" (*MG* 25); from the perspective of a rock, "she was just a small woman . . . who spoke her thoughts aloud because she had no idea anyone was listening" (*MG* 25). But being a rock in the presence of his mother is a difficult task, not only due to their special bond, but also due to the sadness she feels for her unborn baby. At the end of the day, his father arrives and, speaking to himself, he lets it be known that the canoe has been found; at that moment, Star Boy changes "from being a rock to being an ear, a huge ear that could hear every word" (*MG* 28), and the words it listens to are especially important: "nothing can replace a son. Not even a new child that might someday come" (*MG* 28). Speaks to Birds goes on blaming Morning Girl for the canoe incident and Star Boy, claiming his elder sister's innocence, unfolds himself; at last, he ceases to be a rock and becomes his "father's son again because I heard the pleasure in his voice" (*MG* 29).

Nature has particularly strong effects on the island inhabited by the Taíno community. In this context, Star Boy senses an imminent storm approaching. Firstly, he feels it in his blood; secondly, he observes it in the surrounding environment; then, it starts to rain heavily and the strength of the storm increases. Being caught within the hurricane, Star Boy is able recognize a tree. It is

> a very large tree, a special tree with fingers that dug into the earth. . . . It was a place people sat under during important times. The trunk was so broad, the bark so old and carved, that you could find in its designs the faces of all the people who have ever died, if you needed to talk to them once more. We went there to look for the new sister when she didn't come home, and there she was, not far from my grandfather. (*MG* 41)

Despite the mayhem, Star Boy is aware he is approaching the special tree, as if drawn to it due to its unique strength and status; he is simultaneously conscious of his worried parents and of his curious sister. Paradoxically, the tree's somewhat terrifying gigantic size in the eyes of a boy reveals itself to be his protective reassuring space from the storm. When he finally reaches the tree, Star Boy realises he is not alone and, "became part of the tree, another face looking out into the world, watching" (*MG* 42). Feeling the strength of the storm, Star Boy is eventually overcome by fear. Nonetheless, a voice calms him down; it is the voice of his grandfather, Fast Arms, just as he remembers him, "when he used to hold me against his warm skin and tell me stories about the sort of man I would grow up to be" (*MG* 43). Hence, whereas the tree provides Star Boy physical protection, his grandfather's spirit keeps him company and provides comfort to his soul. Then, at long last, the storm comes to an end and Star Boy, grateful for having survived it, thanks his grandfather. The circle is finally complete. Having experienced the storm through the voice of Star Boy, the reader is taken to its aftermath through the voice of Morning Girl. Quietness being re-established and the strength of the hurricane notwithstanding, life has a fresh new start. Looking on the bright side of circumstances, people whose dwellings are partially or completely damaged move to a different new place in the island and start over. Nature is once again calm and, despite the hurricane's strength, the inhabitants of the island have been left a gift: plenty of food within anyone's reach and ready to be eaten — the right setting for a celebration. Thus, it is a time to enjoy and to rejoice for being alive and so people get together to celebrate change and "to share the food that had been presented to us as its apology" (*MG* 47). Celebrating the calm *after* the storm, this community is simultaneously, although unknowingly, celebrating the calm *before* the storm, for Columbus and his fleet's arrival to the island is approaching and, along with it, life as hitherto known is about to change.

In *Sees Behind Trees*, nature and the senses are inextricably related. The name Sees Behind Trees reflects the adolescent boy's skill at absorbing information from the surrounding nature using his other well-developed senses, in order to overcome his lack of sight. In fact, it is the special skill of "seeing behind

trees" which determines that the adolescent boy is chosen by Gray Fire to accompany him in his lifetime search for the land of water. Bearing in mind Sees Behind Trees's short-sightedness, Gray Fire's teachings on how to memorise one's trail in the forest become, in due course, a life-saving measure; as the older man clarifies: "[y]our body will remember where it has been if you let it . . . It recalls what's familiar—but not as your mind does. With your mind you stand outside the world and look in. With your body you are inside already" (*SBT* 52). Thus, Sees Behind Trees is encouraged by his travel companion, firstly to impersonate rain and "[s]uddenly I *was* rain. I remembered what it felt like . . . loving that you were daring enough to have jumped in the first place" (*SBT* 54-55), secondly to become "a raindrop that thinks" (*SBT* 55); at this moment, the adolescent boy becomes subsequently conscious that, "[w]hen I wasn't inside a raindrop—when I stood outside myself and thought of all the terrible things that could happen—everything changed" (*SBT* 55).

Finding Gray Fire's land of water reveals itself to be a difficult mission. However, it is early morning when Sees Behind Trees realises he "had been hearing *through* it [the sound of water] instead of hearing it" (*SBT* 74). Once the aim of their expedition is effectively reached, both men enjoy a special time when their physical disabilities are overcome and, ultimately, fulfil their dreams. On the one hand, Sees Behind Trees is able to see far in the distance with precision for the first time and it is breathtaking, "I had never been anywhere so completely" (*SBT* 80). On the other, Gray Fire returns to the place he has left his heart and, yielding to the enchantment of the land of water, he disappears, thus completing his life-circle. Gray Fire's need originates the journey and sets the direction for the adventure, but "[a]n adventure alone is different than an adventure that is shared" (*SBT* 85) and, without his travelling companion, Sees Behind Trees feels lost. Having expressed earlier his inability to find the way home if he were alone in the deep forest, he listens to Gray Fire's words: "[y]ou can't get lost from yourself . . . After all, you're always where you are" (*SBT* 55). Sees Behind Trees succeeds in leaving the land of water behind. On his way back home, he is drawn to the sound of somebody crying and thus discovers Karna and Pitew's baby boy hidden from the burning remains of his parents' camp. Considering his very young age,

Checha's behaviour is decisive to his life, as he merges with nature in silence and stillness, becoming invisible to the eyes of treacherous people; he is found by his breathing, hardly noticed by anyone but by Sees Behind Trees's acute hearing. Employing his skills and his earlier learning from Gray Fire, Sees Behind Trees begins his journey back home with Checha as his new travelling companion and, after following the path cautiously, Sees Behind Trees finds himself on home ground. The search and subsequent successful discovery of the land of water is a unique and impressive experience which forcibly alters Sees Behind Trees's life.

2.3.7 Vision Quest

In Native American cultures, more often than not, entering adulthood implies going through an initiation rite. For example, in the Wampanoag culture, "[t]he transition into adult status is marked by special observances; both girls and boys undergo initiation ceremonies" and receive new adult names (Seale, Slapin and Silverman 20). This statement is a constituent part of the text "In My Wetu", which is included in Doris Seale (Santee Dakota/Cree), Carolyn Silverman (Cherokee/Blackfeet), and Beverly Slapin's *Thanksgiving: A Native Perspective*. In *Guests*, a vision quest, the experience required for such transition, is referred to as "away time"; again, this is a nature-related subject matter. In "Life Stories", Dorris clarifies that "the Plains Indian male was expected at puberty to venture solo into the wilderness. There he had . . . absolutely to remain until something happened that would transform him. Every human being . . . was entitled to at least one moment of personal, enabling insight" (*Paper Trail* 337).

Being an adolescent boy, Moss is anxious to undergo an analogous kind of experience. Despite a continuous effort to understand what truly occurs during that time, Moss pressures his older cousin Cloud, who refuses to do so because he believes that the time to unveil it has not yet come. As any adolescent, Moss finds it is very unfair to be simultaneously considered too young some of the time and old enough at others; what's more, he cannot bear to listen once again, "[y]ou'll understand when you're older" (*G* 9), for this expression, even if well intended, upsets him deeply.

A moment comes in Moss's life when he suddenly sees himself entering into the mysterious away time. Resenting the situation at home due to an argument with his parents apropos the presence of guests at the harvest feast, Moss leaves. As a consequence of his decision, Moss paradoxically becomes a guest in his own village. Thus, Dorris gives the reader a visitor's viewpoint through the eyes of an actual inhabitant of the village: as an "outsider-insider", Moss looks around slowly and attentively in search of novelty, as a newly-arrived person does in an unknown, new place; but the only conclusion drawn is that life at the village is monotonous. Hence, Moss longs for the unknown and the unexpected, as characteristic of an adolescent boy; and yet, considering this harvest feast, he longs to prevent change from taking place and hence preserve tradition.

At that time, Moss notices someone else's presence, "a quietness to match my own, a calm pool among the swirling waters" (*G* 21), Trouble, and he decides to follow her into the forest. When he finally faces her, Moss lacks the courage to acknowledge the motive that has led him there and says he is about to go on his away time; as he also lacks courage to go back on his word, he is given no choice but to step consciously into the forest. Along with Moss, so does the reader. There is no turning back, since the repercussions of returning would last his lifetime, for it would imply not becoming mature, accounting poorly of himself, and easily giving up on life's opportunities. As a consequence, Moss has to face the overwhelming fear that takes hold of him in the midst of the unknown forest and, though with considerable difficulty, he manages to overcome it. Following Cloud's advice, he opens his mind and, as a result, he listens to a porcupine to whom he admits how deeply he wishes to be grown up. Moss memorises her words: "You are who you are" (*G* 45); later that day, pondering on the matter, he understands that, "[t]o discover who I was, I didn't need to go away. I had to go *in*, and I had a feeling that was much more difficult" (*G* 113). In the end, initially a stranger to whom the forest has been indifferent, Moss becomes its guest.

As a teenage girl whose behaviour, more often than not, resembles that expected of a boy, Trouble finds it difficult to meet the expectations of her parents, who criticise her for being "more boy than girl, telling me that nobody will ever want me for a wife" (*G* 55). In fact, both adolescents react in an unusual way: the girl is

aggressive and the boy cries; hence, their conduct defies stereotyped behaviour, given that their attitudes invert conventional expectations. Pondering on the matter, Moss asks with curiosity whether Trouble likes being a girl, to which the girl answers with yet another question: "Would *you* want to be one?" (*G* 56); realising that he has never considered it before, but willing to listen to different viewpoints Moss asks Trouble to tell him about being a girl before answering (*G* 57). Nonetheless, the role reversal reveals itself to be truly challenging. Again complaining about their lives, both adolescents suddenly ask the same question: "What about what *I* want?" (*G* 59) and, at that moment, they understand that, despite the difference, their inner experience is analogous.

Later, in his attempt to return home, Moss senses the presence of somebody else and the thrilling part of it is that the person found is Trouble. Moss's sight of her is gradual, as if he were unveiling a secret and, in fact, he does so because the girl is dressed as a boy. Disregarding the fact that their community's custom of going on an away time is reserved for adolescent boys and taking into consideration that she is an adolescent as well, Trouble decides to go through that special experience and, accordingly, she dresses in boys' clothes and goes into the forest. The girl's break with tradition induces the boy to ponder on the concept of change in the process of growing up and, once more, he understands her point of view: "Trouble had been like me, thinking change was something magic, something that happened fast. But change took more than putting on different clothes or finding a porcupine willing to talk. This afternoon we were still who we had been this morning, just perhaps a little more so" (*G* 78). Thus Moss apprehends the meaning of growing up and finally accepts its slowness.

2.3.8 Respect for Elders

Amongst Native American peoples it is common practice to perceive elders as revered members of the community. In point of fact, children "learn the norms of their society and the skills needed for survival by listening to stories told by elders and watching adult activities" (Seale, Slapin and Silverman 19) and the elders "are cared for and respected by all [in the community]. Through their

teachings and counsel, the community and nation perpetuate its beliefs, traditions, crafts and skills" (Seale, Slapin and Silverman 20). Moreover, among the Wampanoag people, children's "questions are not passed aside as childishness, but are patiently answered [by elder people]. This encourages children to ask questions of their elders anytime they need advice. They will carry this with them when they become adults. Everyone seeks the advice, wisdom, and favour of the elders. This is considered a great blessing" (Seale, Slapin and Silverman 27). Accordingly, Dorris presents elders as active participants in each novel: in *Morning Girl*, it is the spirit of his deceased Grandfather who keeps Star Boy company during the violent storm; again, in *Guests*, it is the figure of Grandfather that acts as the bearer of ancient customs, namely symbolic traditional crafts; finally, Sees Behind Trees considers Gray Fire to be "the most completely grown-up person" he knows (*SBT* 27) and, ultimately, this revered old man becomes the adolescent boy's mentor in their journey to the land of water.

2.3.9 The Role of the Family

Family is fundamental in each of Dorris's novels. The protagonists' family life resembles, to a great extent, the life of many children and adolescents at the present time: on the one hand, there is frequently a divergence of opinion between children and parents, as well as disagreements amongst the children themselves; on the other, there are moments of closeness, quietness and care between the family members, even if those moments are unspoken. Taking marriage into consideration, the relationship of every couple is quite down-to-earth. There are different kinds of discussion as expected between a couple; some have trivial contours, as is the case of Moss's parents' discussion just before his leaving home; others are more serious, as is the case of Red Feathers pleased with being away from home, for his parents "had been shouting at each other more than usual since the storm" (*MG* 55). Even if lightly approached in *Guests*, Dorris introduces the idea of marriage and its relation to kin. Trouble is kin to Moss's mother's "Turtle Clan—which meant that she was not related to my grandfather, my father, or me, and that she lived on the other side of the village with people that I'd see every day but mostly didn't know" (*G* 22). Moss keeps his distance from the

girls of the other side of the village, “because a long time off, when I got married, my mother said it would probably be to one of them” (*G* 22) and, according to his mother, “[a] husband and wife need to be new to each other” (*G* 22).

As regards parenthood, it includes the experiences of adoption, announced pregnancy and miscarriage. On the one hand, baby Checha saved by Sees Behind Trees becomes “[his] youngest brother now that . . . mother and father have adopted him” (*SBT* 104). On the other, Morning Girl and Star Boy’s mother, She Wins the Race, announces that she is expecting a new arrival in the family. However, the new baby sister does not come; the disappointment of the family members notwithstanding, it brings the family closer in general, and the siblings in particular. With respect to the inclusion of this matter in the plot, Dorris supports that such decision is based on the fact that, “in hunting and gathering societies a large percentage of babies didn’t survive their first six months of life” (Chavkin and Chavkin 189).

As can be seen, not only in *Morning Girl*, but also in *Sees Behind Trees*, the role of the maternal uncle is relevant. In the former narrative he is Sharp Tooth, the brother Mother had difficulty relating to at a younger age but with whom she shares a healthy relationship as an adult; Morning Girl doubts greatly that, in the future, her relationship with her own brother might improve, but “Mother promises that someday my brother and I will be friends, like she and her brother Sharp Tooth finally got to be” (*MG* 3). Dorris draws here a parallel between generations in a distant past that still exists in this day and age; the reader can easily identify with either of the siblings from *Morning Girl*. In the latter narrative, Brings the Deer is the maternal uncle who, to some extent, assumes the role of being Sees Behind Trees’ older brother; taking into consideration that the adolescent boy is the eldest child in the family, it strengthens the uncle’s influence in his nephew’s life; in the words of Sees Behind Trees, “[m]y uncle had always been kind to me, a better friend than any boy my own age” (*SBT* 23).

Pondering on siblings’ relationships, *Morning Girl* is manifestly the book in which this relationship plays a vital role for the reason that, as initially stated, the storyline is told through the alternate voices of Morning Girl and Star Boy, respectively the eldest and the youngest child; according to Dorris, theirs is a

relationship of rivalry (Amoss and Suben 101). Their diametrically opposed names mirror how they place themselves in the relationship, as Morning Girl declares: “For him [Star Boy], night is day, sleep is awake. It’s as though time is split between us, and we only pass by each other as the sun rises or sets” (*MG* 3), and then she adds, “[u]sually, for me, that’s enough” (*MG* 3). From the girl’s standpoint, her brother’s presence is a destructive nuisance and, despite She Wins the Race’s constant effort to smooth that conflictual relationship, both of her children refuse to change their minds. Nonetheless, these two utterly different siblings also prove to be there for one another when it is important. During the interview conducted by Allan and Nancy Chavkin, Dorris tells of a noteworthy review of *Morning Girl* which declared that, Dorris has “effectively paralleled the sibling relationship between brother and sister with the complications of communication between two separate cultural traditions” (Chavkin and Chavkin 214); the writer acknowledges that it was not his original intention, but approves this symbolic perspective of Morning Girl and Star Boy’s relationship.

2.3.10 Storytelling in the Native American Oral Tradition

In Native American oral tradition, storytelling plays a fundamental role. It keeps the history of a people alive and conveys life stories which may be valuable lessons to their listeners in general and to younger generations in particular. In his essay “Native American Literature in an Ethnohistorical Context”, Dorris elucidates that a story “would typically be told to a general audience within the society, including the full range of ages from early childhood to grandparent; it would be recounted with gesticulation and exaggeration by a performance specialist. It would be expected to have different meanings to the various categories of listeners—instructive, entertaining, reinforcing, or all three” (*Paper Trail* 237). As to the conclusions drawn from each story, more often than not, they are left to the listener; in Dorris’s books, the reader is already given some conclusions.

In *Morning Girl* the importance of storytelling may be observed in distinct moments. On the one hand, shortly after the hurricane, “[i]t was the time for each person to tell a story, to act it out while the rest of us held our heads in fear or covered our mouths when the laughter grew too strong to contain” (*MG* 47). On

the other hand, whilst Star Boy's bad mood drives him away from everybody, particularly his family, and spending the night partly alone he remembers the "stories that small children believe, stories about strange happenings" (*MG* 59); Morning Girl remembers them as well, but none of the siblings verbalises it, the girl having to return home alone and the boy having to stay alone on the beach.

In the pursuit of his own identity Sees Behind Trees meets Gray Fire and then, realizing the older man is about to tell a story, Sees Behind Trees respectfully waits for it to come, until finally Gray Fire opens "his hands upon his knees to release the story" (*SBT* 35). Gray Fire travels back to the time when he was an adolescent himself and an extraordinarily fast runner; however, being too proud of oneself may be dangerous, for it may lead to promises that cannot be kept. To an extent, Sees Behind Trees understands Gray Fire as he has experienced the feeling of being expected to live up to his name. Then, the storyteller gives a vivid account of a special place "where you wouldn't have to see to be" (*SBT* 38), and the young listener focuses his attention on the description, listening "with every skill I had learned—because wherever it was, that was where I wanted to go" (*SBT* 38). At this moment, even though to a small degree, Gray Fire's story becomes Sees Behind Trees's as well. The older man reveals, at last, the existence of the land of water whose description delights Sees Behind Trees, who seizes that single opportunity to picture images in detail, since "[p]eople never talked so clearly about what they saw" (*SBT* 39). Gray Fire concludes by declaring that it was his greed for speed has left him with a limp and "since that night my every limping step has reminded me that I want to go back and look for what I left in the land of water. . . . For my heart" (*SBT* 44). The circle of the story closes at this point and yet, to its teller, it is still open. Quietly respecting Gray Fire's moment of introspection and remembering his parents' teachings, Sees Behind Trees acts accordingly and shows his gratitude — "I pressed my fists together and said the polite thing . . . 'Thank you for the gift of your story'" (*SBT* 45).

Unlike *Morning Girl* and *Sees Behind Trees*, three stories are explicitly told within the main narrative of *Guests*. The explicitness lies mainly in the graphical aspect because they appear in italics, and thus it accentuates their importance in

the narrative in particular and in the Native American tradition in general. Thus, “Running Woman” is told by Trouble, “How the People Lost each Other” by Moss’s father and “The Beaver and the Muskrat Woman” by Moss’s mother. The two latter stories are told to the guests at the Harvest Feast. As said above, Trouble tells the story of her grandmother Boulder’s sister, a girl named Mistake who became known as Running Woman. At a younger age,

> *Mistake was so convinced of her own importance and value that it was impossible to disagree with her, so sure of her opinions that no one could persuade her to change her mind and see a situation in another way. Worst of all, most of the time she was right about what she believed, so she never learned a lesson from an error, never was shown up to be foolish, never had to apologize after being proven wrong. . . . She preferred the new over the old, the exciting over the safe, the quick over the slow. By the time she had reached the age where she was ready to change from being a girl to being a woman, there seemed to her almost nothing left to do for the first time*. (*G* 66-68)

Like any other child in the village, Mistake is encouraged to learn how to master certain skills essential for life. Whereas boys are expected to learn to use a bow and arrow, “and, when able, kill small animals” (Seale, Slapin and Silverman 19), girls are expected to stay home learning how to care for the household while playing with dolls, and to “make clothing by dressing their cornhusk dolls” (Seale, Slapin and Silverman 19). Furthermore, “[w]omen teach the girls the female skills; men teach the boys the male skills. The children in their play imitate their elders at work [and a]s they grow older they assist the parents in their work to gain personal experience” and learn the ways of life (Seale, Slapin and Silverman 27). Starlight, Mistake’s mother, calls the girl’s attention to the fact that a woman *“must master many ordinary jobs so that you will be responsible, dependable, steady, and strong. It’s a woman’s way to be so skilled at her work that it becomes invisible. It is a woman’s way to hold the world together by the force of her quietness”* (*G* 68). The alternative — to take on a man’s job — is also acceptable and respectable but, either way, the girl cannot prevent herself from growing up; however, disregarding the fact that she has to take on the traditional role of a Wampanoag woman, as well as her mother’s claims, Mistake stubbornly insists on her

standpoint and disappears running faster than the wind, thus becoming known as Running Woman, the girl forever bound to remain a young woman.

It is possible to draw a parallel between Running Woman and Gray Fire's twin sister, Otter who also has a strong personality. As a young child she often shows her intelligence and, more often than not, proves her point; furthermore, she is rarely contradicted. On the one hand, Mistake refuses to grow up and runs away, and on the other, Otter prevents herself and Gray Fire from fully growing up. That is, subsequent to the incident which leaves Gray Fire with a lifetime injury, the twins promise each other never to marry or become parents, as they consider that that day has detached them "from the usual flow of life" (*SBT* 70), freezing them together as they had always been (*SBT* 70). Furthermore, whereas Mistake is an exceptional runner who deliberately flees from facing life and, consequently, from her family, as an adolescent Gray Fire is an excellent runner whose life is deliberately frozen, in order to stay with his family.

With reference to Trouble, like her great-aunt, she is said to be fast runner and as a young child, her excellence was approved of and praised by her parents, until the time came when the compliments ceased and the girl no longer met her parents' expectations. In spite of highly admiring Running Woman, Trouble is not keeping herself from growing up, but she is going through difficult times to understand the best way to do it. Parallel to Mistake and Blackberry's relationship, Trouble's younger sister, Eggshell is invisible, "the one like Boulder" (*G* 114). Once Trouble disappears, Eggshell is afraid of having induced her older sister to go away, just as Blackberry had given Mistake the idea to run (away); but, in the end, it is the thought of Eggshell which helps preventing Trouble from running away.

The second story is told briefly before the beginning of the Harvest Feast, little after the arrival of the guests. Taking into consideration that "[i]t's not polite for people to be next to each other for too long without words to connect them" (*G* 91), Two Halves charges her husband with telling the guests a story, since he is the one who has invited them to the Harvest Feast. The point in discussion then is not language, but which story to tell. As regards to the manifest lack of understanding a different language, Two Halves disregards the matter by plainly considering that "[t]hey must have tales of their own, so they'll recognize that it's a story from the

way you tell it" (*G* 91). Two Halves suggests the story "about how human beings got separated from each other" (*G* 92), which is known by everyone in the village and is "offered to guests to make them feel as if they weren't truly strangers" (*G* 92). Entitled "How the People Lost Each Other", the story tells of a *"grandmother, whose name was Can't Say No, believed that her granddaughter, whose name was Never Enough, could do nothing wrong. . . . But no matter how many kindnesses Can't Say No bestowed on Never Enough always wanted more"* (*G* 95-96); it further concludes that, due to the old lady's lack of assertiveness regarding the young girl's wishes, human beings have grown apart from each other. As the story comes to the end, Moss's Father courteously concludes with the expected "welcoming-back custom" stating: "[t]he people who had already crossed the river went on to create a new tribe . . . They were our ancestors. And the people who had not yet crossed went on to form all the others. Even yours" (*G* 100). Ultimately, Two Halves's idea of telling the guests a story regardless of the language difference, proves to be a very good one, as does her husband's role as a storyteller, for "[t]he guests . . . might not have understood Father's words, but they had been held by the rhythm of his voice, the flash of his eyes, [and] the clap of his hands when the ice cracked in two" (*G* 100). Later in the evening, one of the guests decides to tell a story and, unlike the opinion of Two Halves' concerning language, this particular guest believes that those present will understand his language by merely speaking loudly. The guest's story tells of how his people have arrived to those lands, but it takes the listeners a long time "perceiving that this was a story about a boat" (*G* 106). At the end, in spite of not speaking so loud, Moss's father is able to catch everybody's attention while telling a story, whereas the guest is unsuccessful at the same task.

Then, one last story is told. Although initially expected to be told by Moss, with the intention of replacing the emptiness left by the story he has lost early in the morning, it is told by Two Halves who intervenes and decides on "The Beaver and the Muskrat Woman". Thus, Moss is spared the embarrassment of not knowing the development, much less the end, of a story he starts to tell at his father's request. At the end of his mother's intervention, Moss ponders on the story and acknowledges that,

> always before when I had heard this story it had been funny, causing people to laugh and smile. Today, for some reason, it was more serious. Perhaps it was the way Mother had told it. Perhaps it was the presence of the guests, who expected us to do everything for them and gave back little in return. They made us see ourselves as more like the too-helpful beaver than we would have liked. (*G* 112)

2.3.11 The Other — Contact Established with Strangers

In each of Dorris's historical novels analysed here, the presence of people other than those known to the protagonists is observed, mainly in regard to their encounter and the contact established, as well as the significance of language in the process.

In *Guests*, the core of the plot rests on the title itself. Moss is greatly upset with the expected presence of guests at the Harvest Feast. In point of fact, to him they are mere strangers, people who are disturbingly different — neither family, nor friends, speaking an unknown language. Moss, therefore, strongly believes that the guests' presence will disturb the pleasure of the feast and views them as inhibitors: every participant is conditioned by the presence of strangers (both parties are unfamiliar to each other), limiting their spontaneity and joy at celebrating the end of a year and the beginning of a new one, and thus Moss feels the moment will not be truly honoured; in his words: "People acted so differently in front of outsiders. . . . *We would have to stand outside our own words*, listen to ourselves to make sure we were *proper*" (*G* 12) [my italics]. Standing outside one's own words implies observing oneself as if one were an outsider, a guest, and assessing one's behaviour as appropriate or inappropriate; such behaviour demands thus a degree of detachment that lessens the pleasure of the celebration. The behavioural containment notwithstanding, the lack of command of the other's language is a hindrance to communication and subsequently provides a lack of motivation to welcome strangers.

Taking into consideration that Moss's father has made the invitation out of carefulness and politeness and, even though feeling uncomfortable about the presence of guests at such a special celebration, he recalls that "[a]n invitation once given cannot be taken back" (*G* 11). Moreover, Two Halves reminds her son

that he is only expected to “make room in the eating circle, be polite” (*G* 12); she further believes that hospitality is simply the expected behaviour towards guests, for “[h]ospitality isn’t unusual, something you choose to do or not, it’s ordinary” (*G* 13). Guests have previously been to the village and have failed to meet some of the expected rules of politeness. This time, being such a special celebration, the guests arrive empty-handed bringing no presents, a fact that Grandfather understands as being highly disrespectful. However, “all this notwithstanding, guests are guests and should be treated with hospitality. They must be offered food and shelter, must be entertained with stories and music, before the serious business of trade begins” (*Paper Trail* 149), states Dorris in his article entitled “Discoveries”; and, although this statement refers to *Morning Girl*, it is also valid for *Guests*.

Moss is aware of this being a different celebration and wishes that “for just one more right time before things began to change” (*G* 15). Nevertheless, at the end of his long day, Moss abruptly understands a truth he has kept himself from facing, the fact that it is not his father’s wish to have guests, but unlike Moss who still is a boy, he has to honour his invitation. Unable to verbalise his feelings, Moss chooses to internalise them and, in consequence, becomes more mature. Subsequently, he becomes conscious of yet another startling reality: “the guests were no happier being guests than we were being hosts” (*G* 93), and, at long last, Moss is able to understand the guests’ standpoint. Afterwards, Moss’s father enlightens his adolescent son about the concept of interdependence and puts it into perspective by referring to the guests’ presence at the Harvest Feast — “*we’re not alone in the world*, Moss” [my italics] (*G* 115); at times, people need help and it should be provided. Nonetheless, Moss still has difficulty in coping with the issue; at the beginning of the day, he believes that the presence of strangers at this special celebration marks the end of an era; at its end, despite having fairly understood the guests’ point of view, Moss still mistrusts them and hence questions his father on the possibility of, once again, bringing food to them the year that follows. The answer, however, defies Moss’s pessimistic mood and casts doubt on it in a note of humour: “Let the children of Never Enough dream” (*G* 116).

In *Sees Behind Trees*, in the course of their search for the land of water, the two explorers meet a family of strangers. Sees Behind Trees is startled when he realises that those people are unknown to him. Gray Fire identifies them as strangers, but in the adolescent boy's mind, "strangers were some kind of make-believe beings" (*SBT* 63), and so the old man clarifies, "[t]hey are *like* us, but they are *not* us" (*SBT* 64). Considering that there are other people unknown to him shakes Sees Behind Trees's viewpoint of world; suddenly, it becomes wider and everything is possible (*SBT* 64). The adolescent boy's questioning of the humanity of strangers is a reverse concept from that of the first explorers who "were so taken aback at the very existence of Native Americans that it took a century-long debate involving university scholars and the pope himself before they could accept even the humanity of these peoples" (Dorris *Native Americans* 3). Additionally, in spite of a general consciousness of an existing American ethnic diversity (Dorris *Native Americans* 2), Gray Fire's description of strangers regarding their alleged lack of knowledge, command of language, behaviour and customs is, to a certain extent, the reverse perspective of Native North Americans by the first European settlers. The time comes to meet the strangers and Gray Fire instructs Sees Behind Trees to "[m]ake a lot of noise so they will hear us coming and not be surprised. Remember, to them *we* are the strangers" (*SBT* 66). Once more, Dorris draws the reader's attention to the notion of stranger but, this time, he does so by inverting the point of view and presenting the perspective of the other who, considering the circumstances, might be frightened. As far as language is concerned, Gray Fire's words are undeniably humorous, as he simultaneously wishes the strangers to understand him, despite its being improbable. Soon after, the strangers are introduced as Pitew, Karna and Checha, their baby boy; fear is gradually set aside between these reciprocal strangers, thus creating space to share a meal and much laughter late that night, which showed relief and trust in each other.

Unlike Dorris's other novels, in *Morning Girl*, contact with strangers only takes place at the very end of the narrative. Thus far, life on the island has kept its own pace and Morning Girl is aware that, despite overlooking the fact at times,

hers is a seamless world. At the dawn of the day of the historical bouleversement, the day of the arrival of Christopher Columbus and his fleet, Morning Girl decides to enjoy the sunrise and so she heads to the ocean, “maybe because the sea promised me a story” (*MG* 66), a story about to be unfolded with the arrival of the strangers. At the time, Morning Girl believes “[t]hings would be the way they had been, only better” (*MG* 68); conversely, life as hitherto known is about to change for ever.

Having plunged in the ocean, Morning Girl hears “an unfamiliar and frightening sound” (*MG* 68); emerging, she realises that “[i]t was only *people* coming to visit” (*MG* 69) in a small canoe. Since, apparently, there is no reason to be afraid, Morning Girl swims towards them and, having observed closer, she comments: “*What a backward, distant island they must have come from*” [my italics] (*MG* 69). At this moment, for the first time, the reader is confronted with the concept and the perception of strangers, which are provided through Morning Girl’s observations. The notion of an existing other is increased when the identity of the strangers is revealed — Christopher Columbus and his fleet. In spite of her personal remarks, Morning Girl reminds herself it is extremely impolite to laugh at guests, particularly since she is the first person meeting them; it is, furthermore, her intention to establish contact properly. Having done so and concluding that they are not enemies, Morning Girl refers to the strangers as guests. As far as they are concerned, they are bemused and going through the experience of accepting simultaneously difference and similarity. In her language, Morning Girl politely introduces herself and her family, not realising that the strangers do not understand her; at last, one of the newly-arrived people speaks to her but she cannot understand the language, perhaps “he was talking Carib or some other impossible language” (*MG* 71). Even so, Morning Girl believes communication would be established and, “[i]t would be a special day, a memorable day, a day full and new” (*MG* 71), but with unforeseeable consequences in a near future. Meanwhile, “[t]he strangers were drifting in the surf, arguing among themselves . . . They seemed very worried, very confused, very unsure what to do next. *It was clear that they hadn’t traveled much before*” (*MG* 72) [my italics]. Morning Girl’s remarks reveal that the members of her community are used to establishing

contact with other peoples from diverse places; according to Dorris, Native Americans "were quite used to cultural diversity and consequently probably regarded Europeans as no more or less bizarre than any number of tribes other than their own" (Dorris *Native Americans* 3-4). In addition, it is worthy of note that Morning Girl's comments on the voyageurs have an undeniable touch of humour; considering that this is an adolescent girl encountering a group of men, who have just crossed the ocean, it is possible to affirm that the abovementioned touch of humour has a touch of Dorris's irony.

The epilogue is significantly different from the preceding narrative, for the reason that the narrator's perspective changes drastically; it alters to the voice of Christopher Columbus. Hence, the standpoint of "us—the people of this island" and "you—the recently arrived strangers" changes into "us—the European seamen" and "you—the ignorant people of this far-off island"; in Columbus's words, *"I, in order that they would be friendly to us—because I recognized that they were people who would be better freed* [from error] *and converted to our Holy Faith by love than by force"* (*MG* 73). With reference to the text itself, it was part of a letter written addressed to the Spanish King and Queen, dated the 11th October 1492 (*MG* 73), that is, the celebrated day that Columbus set foot on the land he believed to be India. In the letter, Columbus considers the indigenous people to be "*very poor in everything*" (*MG* 74) and remarks that they did not wear any piece of clothing and seem to be very young, "none did I see of more than thirty years of age" (*MG* 74); he ultimately declares that they need to "learn to speak" (*MG* 74). Finally, in his letter, Columbus mentions he "did not see more than one quite young girl" (*MG* 74) and Dorris, wondering "who she was prior to that encounter" (*Paper Trail* 141), converted that girl into a fictional character — Morning Girl.

2.3.12 The Concept of Growing Up

The three storylines taken into consideration, *Morning Girl* is the one in which the matter of growing up is less apparently explored. In *Sees Behind Trees* and in *Guests*, the protagonists undergo coming-of-age experiences and reflect upon them. According to Dorris, the story of the latter book, though applicable to

the former, “is about growing up, understanding family relationships and figuring out who you are — all through elemental native tribal patterns” (Loer 33).

On the one hand, in *Guests*, Moss reaches some conclusions at the end of his long day. He understands that his leaving home is a source of distress to his parents, particularly being on such an important day and then realises that, “the only person *I* could blame was me” (*G* 87). Afterwards, induced by his grandfather, the adolescent boy considers the time spent in the forest and declares that he has had an away time; nonetheless, as Moss’s away time has not met his expectations, he concludes that, unlike what is expected of an away time, he has not changed. However, his grandfather clearly disagrees and Moss explains that “there was a porcupine . . . She made me tell me about myself. . . . I had to admit things I wasn’t proud of” (*G* 117); moreover, the porcupine “said I am who I am” (*G* 118). Grandfather agrees and clarifies that identity is complex; Moss considers that “[h]is words were like a gift hidden behind a tree, something that awaited me when I was ready to find it” (*G* 118). At last, balance has been re-established and the circle is complete. Along these lines, the outcome of *Guests* is a story within a story, and two aspects should be observed: the first being that the outer story establishes the different and somewhat unconventional viewpoint of a Native North American adolescent of a widely celebrated date in North America in general and the United States in particular; the second aspect relates to the identification of the reader with the protagonist, thus prompting the former to realise that, apart from language and customs, he or she is very much like the latter.

On the other hand, in *Sees Behind Trees*, the protagonist ponders on a question asked by Gray Fire as he recalls the land of water that has once captured his soul: “[w]here does a runner run when he has arrived at the only finish line he doesn’t want to cross?” (*SBT* 40). Sees Behind Trees, facing the old man, considers that, “[t]his was a question for which I had no answer. To not want . . . *more*—to me, that was . . . awful” (*SBT* 40). When at last both explorers get to the land of water and observe its beauty, Sees Behind Trees is led into feelings of awe and wonder and forgets his worries, as he admits: “I could stay here forever and it would not be long enough. I could live content in the land of water” (*SBT* 81); he thus understands Gray Fire’s earlier question. Sees Behind Trees further

understands the importance of resisting the beauty of the land of water and only keeping it within himself, thus benefiting from the once in a lifetime opportunity he has been given to see with precision, but acknowledging at the same time that he has to face his life with his short-sightedness. In the end, Sees Behind Trees respects Gray Fire's teaching, "[t]he act of giving is what matters" (*SBT* 56); the adolescent boy who becomes a young man, not only finds and saves a baby boy, but also helps both siblings' lives to come full circle: Gray Fire recovers his life at the moment he returns to the land of water and Otter lives once again by becoming a grandmother to Checha. As for the whole expedition and its story, Sees Behind Trees decides that when Checha "is older I will tell him the *whole* story, even the parts I don't understand" (*SBT* 104). Ultimately, in his quest to respect his adult name, Sees Behind Trees becomes aware that its meaning was not only literal, but also metaphorical.

2.4 Conclusion

Michael Dorris's three young adult novels reflect the complex times of later childhood and early adolescence. Taking place in a far chronological past and in Native American communities which no longer exist in the same fashion in the present day, these narratives account for the lives of several adolescents in the process of constructing their personal identities. Dorris's decision to employ a first-person narrator is essential, for it allows the gradual identification of the reader with the protagonist, as they are likely to undergo a similar process. In their article "Through their eyes: Are characters with visual impairment portrayed realistically in young adult literature?", Pamela Carroll and Penny Rosenblum state that, "[y]oung adult literature gives adolescents opportunities to share in the lives of others who ask the same questions they ask and who have the same types of experiences and concerns" (Carroll and Rosenblum 620). Thus, both protagonist and reader have to ponder on diverse issues: the importance of names and naming; handling loneliness and solitude; the relevance of nature and the senses; the significance of a vision quest in an adolescent's life; the existing respect for elders; the role of the

family; the relevance of storytelling in the Native American oral tradition; establishing contact with strangers and, consequently, perceiving the Other; and the concept of growing up.

Taking the stereotyped Indian into consideration, Gleach reminds us that, "[t]he Euro-American stereotypes of Indians are based in European colonists' misunderstandings of Indian culture and Indians' actions. The consequences of these misunderstandings continue to develop today, and it is only through an increased awareness of the processes by which they originate that there can be any possibility of resolving some of these differences" (Gleach 205). Dorris further draws attention to the fundamental importance of an individual's "formative years" (Seale, Slapin and Silverman 46), a time of life during which concepts are internalized and misconceptions apprehended.

Morning Girl, *Sees Behind Trees* and *Guests* are officially children-oriented books, but it is not necessary to see them as only this; differently aged readers may easily find interest in them. According to Dorris, "a writer doesn't write for a particular audience, he or she writes in a quest for a true and compelling narrative voice. If that can be uncovered, the question of age, gender or ethnicity is completely and blessedly irrelevant" (Amoss and Suben 101). By reversing the perspective of ethnicity and gender, Dorris deconstructs stereotypes and demonstrates that, more often than not, difference is mainly superficial and the human inner self may easily identify with others. Ultimately, throughout the process of growing up, accepting change is an arduous but not impossible task.

In view of Frederic Gleach's words: "It might never be possible to understand another world-view fully, but with hard work, open-mindedness, and respect for cultural differences, we can always hope to improve" (200-201), Michael Dorris accentuates the belief that, through his three historical novels in particular and literature in general, with patience and perseverance, it is possible to improve in the understanding of the Other and respect existing cultural differences. In his 1979 proposal to the Faculty Development Competition at Dartmouth College, Dorris asserted: "Europeans and surviving Indians misunderstood each other over the years on a variety of issues . . . As the world becomes smaller it becomes increasingly important to understand how historically

different cultural groups can learn to cope with and interact with each other" (Dorris Pages Two and Three).

3. Analysis of Louise Erdrich's Young Adult Novels: *The Birchbark House* and *The Game of Silence*

My travels have become so focused on books and islands that the two have merged for me. Books, islands. Islands, books. . . .
So these islands, which I'm longing to read, are books in themselves.
(*Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country* 3)
Louise Erdrich

3.1 Louise Erdrich and Her Writing

Louise Erdrich is a highly praised writer. In the *Handbook of Native American Literature*, John Lloyd Purdy declares that Erdrich's "work has been critically acclaimed and widely popular, so her writings continue to garner influential critical attention while also reaching a broad, multicultural audience" (Wiget 423). Amongst many other activities, Erdrich has taught poetry to large and small groups within the North Dakota Poet in the Schools programme, worked for a small press bookstore distribution service, and was a writer-in-residence at Dartmouth in the early 1980s. Her writing encompasses fiction and non-fiction, novels for adults and young adults, children's picture books and poetry. Erdrich is a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of the Anishinabe people and, as a writer of Native American and Euro-American cultural heritage, her writing "incorporates the mixed-ancestry dilemma into her art, and . . . her works . . . often provide an array of characters who find resolution, fulfillment, and affirmation in their Native blood" (Wiget 424). According to Purdy, Erdrich "explores the potential of written literature to express—and perhaps to perpetuate—tribal points of view" (Wiget 423). Moreover, "Erdrich's emphasis on the endurance of her people places her at the very heart of current Native American literature, which, through its very existence, displays this survival while dramatizing its means" (Wiget 425). Hence, Purdy claims that Erdrich's stories are strongly autobiographical and that "[h]er works have depth through their elaborately developed characters—some heroic, some tragic, some both—whose lives play out beside family and clan histories, and the larger story of their implied community, which changes, yet stays much the same" (Wiget 424).

As a writer of Native American ancestry, oral tradition plays a major role in her writing and, in *Winged Words: American Indian Writers Speak*, in an interview with Laura Coltelli, Erdrich regards herself as a storyteller (45). Furthermore, she declares, oral tradition “is the reason so many stories are written in the first person—I hear the story told. At the same time I believe in and deeply cherish books and believe the library is a magical and sacred storehouse. A refuge. . . . I love the voice and I love the texture of writing, the feel of the words on the page, the construction" (Chavkin 231). Pondering on her writing, in an interview with Nancy and Allan Chavkin, Erdrich reveals that she has “no rules about writing. Sometimes a book has an outline and other times I feel my way along, piecing it together bit by bit until the book answers itself” (Chavkin 247). In fact, a “novel comes to light as it is written. It gathers its own material and acquires life, substance” (Chavkin 243); what is more, books have a life of their own (Chavkin 226). Unpredictability is a key-word in her writing process (Chavkin 221) and, despite some people who might perceive her stories as magical, Erdrich explains: “I was raised believing in miracles and hearing of true events that may seem unbelievable” (Chavkin 221). She further adds: “[t]here is no quantifiable reality. Points of view change the reality of a situation and there is a reality to madness, imagined events, and perhaps something beyond that” (Chavkin 224). For all that matters, “[a]n imagination is composed of all the signs and wonders of childhood, as well as the range of trivialities and possibilities that come with age” (Chavkin 226).

3.2 Erdrich’s Young Adult Novels

3.2.1 Introduction

Louise Erdrich’s Native American cultural inheritance establishes the premises of her writing for a younger audience. Four published books account for her interest in literature for younger and older children, namely: *Grandmother’s Pigeon* (1996), *The Birchbark House* (1999), *The Range Eternal* (2002) and *The Game of Silence* (2005). On the one hand, *Grandmother’s Pigeon* and *The Range*

Eternal are picture books; brightly illustrated by Jim LaMarche, the former induces the reader to consider the elders' valuable insight; the latter, with rich illustrations by Steve Johnson and Lou Fancher, tells of a wood-burning stove and its central role in the life of a family in the Turtle Mountains. On the other hand, *The Birchbark House* is a novel whose protagonist is Omakayas, a seven-year old Ojibwe girl living with her family on an island in Lake Superior in the mid-nineteenth century; *The Game of Silence* is its sequel. In spite of addressing an older juvenile audience, these books have illustrations in black-and-white drawn by Erdrich herself. Taking into consideration the length and depth of Erdrich's fiction for children, and the potential of her picture books notwithstanding, this dissertation will focus its analysis on *The Birchbark House* and *The Game of Silence*. For practical purposes, quotations from these narratives will be referred to as *BBH* and *GS* respectively.

3.2.2 Erdrich's Standpoint in the Writing of Her Young Adult Novels

With reference to Erdrich's young adult novels, the essence of *The Birchbark House*'s plot lies in research undertaken by Louise Erdrich's sister, Lise Erdrich, and their mother, Rita Gourneau Erdrich, on their family life. They "found ancestors on both sides who lived on Madeline Island during the time in which this book is set. One of them was Gatay Manomin, or Old Wild Rice", to whom the author expresses her gratitude, as well as to "all of his descendants, [her] extended family", in the Thanks and Acknowledgments section of this book. Louise Erdrich moreover declares, in the abovementioned section, that "[t]his book and those that will follow are an attempt to retrace [her] own family's history"; in point of fact, subsequent to the publication of *The Game of Silence*, a third book is already being written, *Twelve Moons Running*, in a planned series of nine books, as declared by the author in an interview published in the "Extras" section of the first paperback version of *The Game of Silence*.

In view of the aforementioned, one Native American people par excellence inhabits Erdrich's young adult novels: the Anishinabeg. Anishinabe means "the original people" and, as clarified by Erdrich, it is "the original name for the Ojibwe or Chippewa people, a Native American group who originated in and live mainly in

the northern North American woodlands" (*GS* 251). At present, there are Ojibwe reservations both in United States territory, namely Michigan, Minnesota, Wisconsin, North Dakota and Montana, and in the Canadian provinces of Ontario, Manitoba and Saskatchewan. As regards *The Birchbark House* and *The Game of Silence*, the terms Anishinabe and Ojibwe are used interchangeably and, after careful reflection, they are similarly employed in my considerations on Erdrich's narratives.

3.2.3 Language

Erdrich's usage of language in *The Birchbark House* and *The Game of Silence* is noteworthy. Notwithstanding the English language in which the two narratives are essentially elaborated, the author introduces Ojibwe words and expressions into the main body of the text. In a note, apologizing to the reader for any inaccuracies, Erdrich elucidates that, "Objiwemowin was originally a spoken, not written, language, and for that reason spellings are often idiosyncratic. There are also many, many dialects in use. To make the Obijwemowin in the text easier to read, I have often used phonetic spellings" (*GS* 249). In view of the reader's probable lack of contact with this language, Erdrich created a section at the end of each book, constituting a thorough glossary and pronunciation guide of Ojibwe terms (*BBH* 241-244, *GS* 251-256). Taking into consideration the difference in the writing of some terms, the ones used in this dissertation respect the glossary included in *The Game of Silence*.

In the essay "History, Postmodernism, and Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*", Nancy J. Peterson refers to Erdrich's "evocation of the oral in a written text" (Peterson 985). In her historic novels for a younger audience, Erdrich also conveys a need to know story and history as they are "constructed both orally and textually" (Peterson 985), which is shown at the opening of each book. In fact, in the table of contents, the designation of the different sections of each narrative is firstly written in Ojibwe and only then "followed by an English translation" (Peterson 986); what is more, taking into account that the latter version is in parentheses, it highlights the first as opposed to the second. À propos of *Tracks*, in which each season is located in a specific year, Peterson declares that, "[t]his information establishes

two competing and contradictory frames of reference: one associated with orality, a seasonal or cyclic approach to history, a precontact culture; the other linked with textuality, a linear or progressive approach to history, a postcontact culture" (Peterson 986). In both of the aforementioned young adult novels, linear chronological time is not explicitly specified, but to some extent Peterson's declarations do apply to these novels. Thus, the reader is brought into contact with the Ojibwe language as if she/he were a listener. As to the written version of this Native North American language, the reader gathers that the Ojibwe picture writing is only known to a few people, the Midewiwin, who keep "the records for the religious gatherings . . . and [etch] stories and songs on scrolls made of birchbark" (*BBH* 191).

From the characters' standpoint, mastering Zhaganashimowin, "the white man's language" (*BBH* 190), becomes gradually important. Angeline first learns English at the town's Catholic mission school and later teaches at home. Despite its curious writing, the foreigners' language "system sounded incredible—sounds, meanings—but the idea made sense. Thereafter, to learn the Zhaganashimowin letters and sounds became a source of amusement" at home (*BBH* 191). In the winter of 1849, being back to the family log cabin near LaPointe, not only Angeline but also Omakayas attend school every morning. There, they start mastering both written and spoken English; later at night, they practise and successfully teach their father everything they have learned. Mikwam's interest in this language is due to the fact that it has become "clear that those chimookomanag memory tracks could not be trusted" (*BBH* 131). In point of fact, his close friend Fishtail has attended lessons in order to effectively learn "the white man's tracks . . . [and] . . . read the words of the treaties so that his people could not be cheated of land" (*BBH* 191-192).

Thus, Erdrich's usage of language is twofold. Firstly, language provides a double perspective. As aforesaid, the writer's prime language in the novels is English; nonetheless, on almost every page, the reader faces the Ojibwe language and needs, therefore, to assimilate a few new words and expressions. Conversely, in the Ojibwe spoken world of Omakayas, her family and community, English emerges as a language that needs being learnt. Secondly, these novels are set in

the past, at a time when the Anishinabe are still a self-contained people with their own culture and language, but that state of affairs is about to change and the culture and language of the European settlers will prevail. Nevertheless, by weaving these works of fiction in both the English and Ojibwe languages, Erdrich intertwines past and present, history and story.

3.2.4 Circularity of Life, Time, and Narrative

Circularity and interconnectedness are at the core of *The Birchbark House* and *The Game of Silence*. To the Anishinabeg, interconnectedness and balance between all generations are likewise essential as regards the sense of kinship. Thus, Erdrich introduces the reader to this Native American community, "a communal hunting and gathering organization" (Peterson 986), that "[congregates] spring through fall in large, . . . groups near good sugaring, fishing, berrying, and ricing grounds, then dispersing to isolated hunting camps in winter" (Brehm 682), adds Victoria Brehm in her essay "The Metamorphoses of an Ojibwa Manido". Within this migrant community, the concept of family is not restricted to the nuclear family, but it includes the extended one. Furthermore, according to Catherine Rainwater in "Reading between Worlds: Narrativity in the Fiction of Louise Erdrich", "the Native American 'family' allows for various ties of kinship—including spiritual kinship and clan membership" (Rainwater 418). Moreover, the concept of adoption is widely embraced; in fact "[t]he idea that biological children are somehow superior or preferred over other children who belong in a nuclear family is a Western-European, not a Native American, concept" (Rainwater 418).

Respecting the Native American tradition, time is presented in a cyclical rather than in a linear mode in Erdrich's aforementioned novels. Accordingly, time reflects the circularity of the Anishinabe way of life. The concept of a circular narrative is manifest in both novels, as it blends time, storyline and language. Hence, both narratives take place on Madeline Island, known to the Ojibwe as Moningwanaykaning, Island of the Golden-Breasted Woodpecker (*BBH* 6, *GS* ix-x): *The Birchbark House* begins in the spring of 1847 and ends in the spring of 1848, and *The Game of Silence* begins in the summer of 1849 and ends, a year later, in 1850. In fact, each narrative structure is divided into four main sections;

each section corresponds to a season of the year and they are arranged so as to successively follow one another thus completing a whole year, from summer until spring. Thus, “the text implies that cyclic patterns, which describe the seasons of the earth, best disclose the meanings of individual lives” (Rainwater 416).

Taking the narrative of *The Birchbark House* into consideration, its circularity is worthy of note because only at the end is it evident to the reader. A brief chapter precedes the main narrative; it is entitled “The Girl from Spirit Island” and, despite not being identified as such, it is the book’s prologue. Moreover, as revealed in the title, it is geographically set apart from the action of the ensuing chapters. At its outset, the main focus of attention is drawn to the narrative’s first statement: “[t]he only person left alive on the island was a baby girl” (*BBH* 1). Survival is thus set as the first subject matter of the book and the reader is left with the impressive picture of a little human being strong enough to outlive her own family and community. Inherently associated with survival is the threat of death and the reader is not spared its sight: “[a]ll of the village fires were cold. The dead lay sadly in blankets, curled as though sleeping. Smallpox had killed them all” (*BBH* 1-2). This is also the sight of a tired group of voyageurs “who had come there to pick up furs from the Anishinabe people” (*BBH* 1); subsequently, fear settles among the men as all observe the scene from afar and none has the bravery it requires to step closer to the living lonely baby girl and save her; as an excuse, they try to convince themselves of her certain death: “*[s]he’s sick. She looks tired. . . Let her sleep*” (*BBH* 2). Amongst them however, one man decides to tell his wife Tallow about the baby, because “unlike him, his wife was afraid of nothing” (*BBH* 2). Thus, the baby girl is left alone on Spirit Island in the sole company of the melodious singing of dozens of tiny white-throated sparrows, but not for too long. Tallow, the fearless woman, heads to Spirit Island as soon as she knows the news through her husband and rescues the baby — a circle has begun.

The winter of 1847 is marked by disease and ultimately death. Omakayas, almost eight years old, helps her grandmother to nurse their family which has fallen sick to smallpox, and then strives to do it alone. However, that effort and care are not enough to save baby Neewo from death and Omakayas feels she has died with him. In springtime, Old Tallow pays a visit to Omakayas with the intention

of telling the girl her own story, thus helping her overcome the death of young Neewo. Nonetheless, from Omakayas's viewpoint, her story is piercingly simple: "It all happened in the winter. She has a beautiful friend, a favorite baby brother. *They die*. She is left to cry for them" [my italics] (*BBH* 231). Resenting her baby brother's death, Omakayas repudiates life without him. Hence, she is unwilling to listen to Old Tallow's story but, recalling her mother's teaching that one should "be polite as possible to her elders, Omakayas [pretends] to listen to the story" (*BBH* 231); however her effort is limited and she is impolite to Old Tallow. Once balance is re-established, the girl is told she is the sole survivor of the inhabitants of Spirit Island whose lives were taken by the itching sickness, "you were the toughest one, the littlest one, and you survived them all. . . . This was before you were two winters old" (*BBH* 233). At this moment, the line has been crossed and Omakayas wants "to know everything" (*BBH* 234). Old Tallow explains that she fetched her from the island and then, "Mama, Deydey, Nokomis . . . took you as their daughter, loved you as their daughter, you are a daughter to them, and a sister to your brother, and to Angeline" (*BBH* 234). Ultimately, Old Tallow acknowledges: "[y]ou were sent here so you could save the others . . . Now the circle that began when I found you is complete" (*BBH* 235). Becoming conscious of her adoption, Omakayas gradually evokes her memory of loneliness as an infant and recalls: "[i]t was spring . . . Zeegwun. . . . The birds . . . kept me alive . . . their song was my comfort, my lullaby" (*BBH* 237). Next morning, Omakayas wakes to "the very same song . . . from so long ago" (*BBH* 237) and, listening to the white-throated sparrows, she hears Neewo's voice reassuring her of his perpetual presence in her life and, at last, she lets go of her sadness and feels at peace. At last, hope is found and balance is re-established.

3.2.5 The Importance of Names and Naming

In respect of the names of characters, Omakayas's name has a rather special origin; in point of fact, "[t]he name Omakayas appears on a Turtle Mountain census", as Erdrich clarifies in the Thanks and Acknowledgments section of *The Birchbark House*. The author moreover declares that this name is being used "in the original translation because . . . those old names should be

given life" and, despite an existing conventional version, it "is pronounced Oh-MAH-kay-ahs . . . as it was pronounced and spelled in 1892"; therefore, "when [the reader] speaks this name out loud [he or she] will be honoring the life of an Ojibwa girl who lived long ago". Omakayas, as aforementioned the protagonist's name, means Little Frog "because her first step was a hop" (*BBH* 5). The character is especially alive to Erdrich, as stated in a letter published in the last section of the first paperback version of *The Game of Silence*:

> I see through her eyes, feel her feelings, catch myself making her expressions as I write. The delicious shock of diving into Lake Superior in midsummer and the smell of fish stew cooking on an open fire are my experiences, too. I like to do the things Omakayas does, just to make sure I am describing them accurately. So I pick mushrooms, explode puffballs, fall asleep next to my dog, and remember how difficult it was to remain quiet as a child. (*GS* "Extras" 3)

As to Omakayas's family, its members are named after the Native American manner but using English words: such is the case of Pinch, Omakayas's younger brother, Yellow Kettle, their mother, and Old Tallow, an old and dear friend of the family. As the children's father is of Ojibwe and French ancestry, he is mostly addressed by his Ojibwe name, Mikwam (Ice is its English version). Omakayas's grandmother is referred to as Nokomis, Ojibwe for grandmother, and more often than not, both mother and father are also referred to by their family bond, that is, "Mama" and "Deydey" (Ojibwe for father). Consequently, Omakayas's older sister Angeline is the only one with a non-Ojibwe name.

The naming of the two babies who complete the family in distinct times, respectively in *The Birchbark House* and in *The Game of Silence*, is worth considering. In the former, Neewo is Mikwam and Yellow Kettle's fourth child. Neewo is no more than Ojibwe for fourth and, therefore, the baby needs to be given a proper name. Nonetheless, as Nokomis recalls, this "tiny boy [is] a spirit, so far, who . . . [is] deciding whether or not to stay" (*BBH* 37). Yet, despite the "seven or eight people on the island who possessed the right to give names" (*BBH* 39), none seems able to find the right name for the baby. In point of fact, neither Aunt Muskrat's effort to find the baby a name which leads her to fast and sleep in the woods, nor old lady Waubanikway's intention of not giving any "other name

until she found one for the boy" (*BBH* 40) are successful. Hence, observing her little brother's growth, Omakayas secretly decides to name him after birds. Eventually, baby Neewo is given no name at all for he dies of smallpox during that year's winter. In the latter storyline, amongst the poor hungry people that arrive on the island, there is a tiny baby boy who Omakayas takes in her arms and who later becomes the youngest member of the family. Bearing in mind that "the close and intent eyes of the baby" reminded of "the way the wild lynx stalks and watches its prey" (*GS* 10), he is named Bizheens, Ojibwe for baby wildcat.

Considering the names of the other Native American characters, they are for the most part Ojibwe or an English version of their original meaning. An example might be set with the designation of the son of the leader whose people search for refuge in the island: from their arrival in the summer, Omakayas secretly calls him The Angry One until, one day, he tells her his real name: Animikiins, that is, Little Thunder. As regards the names of the European settlers, two characters must be taken into consideration: the first one is a girl named Clarissa and known to Omakayas, her sister and cousins as the Break-Apart Girl, because "her dress nearly cut her in half. Her waist was so tiny that it always looked as though she was ready to snap" (*GS* 46); the second one is the town's priest, Father Baraga, referred to as Black Robe or Black Gown by Omakayas's family, and as Stealer of Souls by Old Tallow (*GS* 205, 186).

3.2.6 Gender and Gender Roles

Pondering on gender and gender roles within this Ojibwe community, two characters are noticeably relevant: Old Tallow, a revered old woman, and Two Strike, a girl with boy-like behaviour.

In essence, Old Tallow is an oddity. She is an older "rangy woman over six feet in height . . . powerful, lean, . . . surrounded by ferocious animals" and "afraid of nothing" (*BBH* 19, 20). Thus, this mannish woman, secluded "by the force and strangeness of her personality" (*BBH* 19), by her bodily and spiritual strength, and lastly by her solitude, is an island within her own community. Distance from other Anishinabeg is only disregarded when it comes to shield and stand by Omakayas's family. In fact, "[f]or some reason, Old Tallow [seems] to treat her,

Omakayas, somewhat differently than other children" (*BBH* 20), a fact that is mentioned a few times throughout the narrative of *The Birchbark House* and clarified at its end.

The first of Old Tallow's idiosyncrasies is her white man's hat under which she tucks her braids and, to an extent, hides her femininity. She is hardly seen without it and in its band "she always [wears] a little gold-shafted feather. This [is] the feather of the golden-breasted woodpecker, the bird that gave its name and chattering cry to this island" (*BBH* 22); furthermore, the "moningwanay feather . . . [represents] the strength of Old Tallow" (*GS* 55). The importance ascribed to this hat is particularly noticeable in an incident that occurs with Pinch in the summer of 1849. Ricing camp has to be left abruptly due to an approaching storm and, in the midst of the suddenness, Pinch is left playing alone in the woods. As Old Tallow starts to rescue the boy, her fragile but meaningful feather is blown out of her hatband. Nonetheless, Omakayas successfully finds and saves it; similarly, the old woman is successful at rescuing Pinch. In point of fact, by saving the moningwanay feather, Omakayas is saving and caring for the soul of her home-ground, Moningwanaykaning, the Island of the Golden-Breasted Woodpecker, which she is coerced to leave the following spring.

The second of Old Tallow's idiosyncrasies is her winter coat. It is "a coat of strange magnificence, a patchwork of destroyed fabrics and new furs. Each year, Old Tallow [adds] something new to the coat so that it never [diminishes], only [increased] in complexity. . . . Old Tallow [reworks] her coat every fall to keep the stitching tight" (*GS* 157). This special coat is the object of one of Erdrich's detailed drawings and its presence is so influential that, "it [can't] be truly winter until Old Tallow [puts] on her remarkable coat" which she wears "until the earliest days of spring" (*BBH* 114). Ultimately, Old Tallow's coat has an identity of its own; it is a symbol of the passing of time, life's lack of perfection but richness of experiences, textures, and colours, and lastly of memories of the Anishinabeg.

Omakayas's cousin Two Strike Girl is known to be "a strong, swift runner . . . better than most boys at hunting and fighting" (*BBH* 95) persistently refusing to do girls' chores. In fact, within the time lag between *The Birchbark House* and *The Game of Silence*, this character evolves in her refusal to accept the established

gender roles. At the wild rice harvest of 1847, “horrified at the idea of doing girl’s work” (*BBH* 97), Two Strike Girl unwillingly obeys Nokomis’s order and works together with Omakayas; however, some time after, she leaves her task and decides to dance the rice, a task usually carried out by boys. Two years later, again at the wild rice harvest, Two Strike Girl has “made herself a special pair of britches and no longer [wears] a skirt” (*GS* 76) and, once more, complains about having to do women’s work. Whereas, at rice camp, Two Strike is determined to show her skills at men’s tasks, Omakayas and Twilight are eager to be recognised for their expertise at women’s tasks. Thus, at the time that the latter two have already enough rice to cover the bottom of the canoe, the former kills an enormous moose with one single shot; returning to camp, Omakayas and Twilight get scolded for not respecting the Ojibwe old ways and wait for the needed permission to go ricing. Conversely, Two Strike Girl is praised for her feat. According to Omakayas:

> now, for sure, nobody expected [Two Strike Girl] to do women’s work. Not anymore. Two Strike was free. Free to hunt while Omakayas turned rice over a hot fire. Free to fish while Omakayas hauled water and stacked wood beside the cooking fire. Free to do whatever she liked while Omakayas looked after the littlest children and made sure they did not burn themselves or wander off. (*GS* 82-83)

Furthermore, despite believing her cousin’s feat might be overlooked, Omakayas is given the painful task of helping Nokomis to tan the hide of the very moose Two Strike Girl has killed. The passing of time seems to swell the girl’s arrogance and her overconfidence leads to utter lack of respect for any elder person. Subsequently, Nokomis tells Omakayas of Two Strike Girl’s alone time in the woods and explains: “Two Strike has an unusual destiny . . . She has [her grandfather’s] fire, but she is young, and she lacks his ability to focus the flame. She needs guidance. Her family will put her out alone in order for her spirits to find her” (*GS* 124). Returning from her time alone, “Two Strike Girl [is] not in the least upset by the spirits, nor [is] her fire put out by hunger and loneliness” (*GS* 142); conversely, she is more defiant than ever before.

3.2.7 The Other — The Chimookomanag

Chimookoman is Ojibwe, “meaning ‘big knife,’ used to describe white people or non-Indians” (*GS* 252) and the term defines the concept of the Other in Erdrich’s juvenile fiction; that is, the Other is not so much a stranger but rather an outsider. Locally, contact between Native American residents and European settlers is mainly established at the town of LaPointe, where the non-Native American inhabitants of the Island of the Golden-Breasted Woodpecker live all year round. Primarily, interaction and communication are established at the trader’s, where not only necessary supplies but also superfluous items may be provided. The trader’s importance notwithstanding, the presence and influence of the mission’s school and church are also to be taken into account.

Pondering on the impact of the non-indigenous religions on the Anishinabeg in general and on Erdrich’s works of adult fiction in particular, Michelle R. Hessler declares in her essay “Catholic Nuns and Ojibwa Shamans: Pauline and Fleur in Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks*” that, “one of the central themes in Louise Erdrich’s works is the role of religious and spiritual beliefs in shaping one’s identity. . . . Her four works—*Love Medicine* (1984), *The Beet Queen* (1986), *Tracks* (1988), and *The Bingo Palace* (1994)— . . . show the influence of the Catholic Church on traditional Ojibwa beliefs” (Hessler 40). In point of fact, Erdrich believes that “[r]eligion is a deep force, and a people magnetize around the core of a belief system” (Chavkin 230). Therefore, it is difficult to remain loyal to two systems of belief, in this case, the Roman Catholic Church and the Native American religious beliefs. Moreover, Erdrich considers that “[l]ife is religious . . . and that includes writing” (Chavkin 228). As regards Erdrich’s *The Birchbark House* and *The Game of Silence*, the Catholic Church is once again present. The mission of LaPointe is under the responsibility of Father Baraga. In fact, this fictional character is likely to have been built on the real Frederic Baraga (1797-1868), a Slovenian Roman Catholic priest who was missionary at La Pointe from 1835 to 1843. Taking these dates into consideration and confronting them with the novels’ time references, that is, 1847 and 1849, it is evident that they do not match, although the coincidence is close enough to license the connection.

Similarly to other novels by Erdrich, these young adult novels also include a character of mixed-blood. Being of French and Ojibwe mixed heritage, Mikwam "was raised and [considers] himself Ojibwa and [keeps] the rules of his mother's dodem or clan, the catfish clan. The Awausesee. Only in some chimookoman things, his cabin . . . and his ability to play and win the white man's game of chess . . . [does] he take secret pride" (*BBH* 79-80). Despite his mistrust of the word of the Chimookomanag and bearing in mind that Father Baraga may be a stealer of souls for Christianity, Mikwam likes to talk with this European man. In this established middle-ground, the mixed-blood man learns about the priest's continent where "kings and queens ruled and great wars raged with terrible killing and many horses to carry the ogitchidaag [Ojibwe for 'male leaders']" (*GS* 186-187). Father Baraga also speaks of "gichi-oodenan where huge numbers of people were concentrated, cities where the houses were made of stone and nobody moved from place to place, but stayed in one house all their lives" (*GS* 187). Thus, not only does the priest speak Ojibwe, he is further putting the language down into words; in point of fact, Frederic Baraga is the author of *A Theoretical and Practical Grammar of the Otchipwe Language: The Language Spoken by the Chippewa Indians* (1850). Nonetheless, Father Baraga's words are not persuasive enough as to make Mikwam and his family become Christian. The European religion clearly focuses on academic education as a means to convert the native peoples, yet there are those who reject the idea.

Learning about the Chimookoman way of life also comes from observation. Once, visiting Break-Apart Girl, a Chimookoman girl, Omakayas observes the awakaanag, the slave animals kept at the back part of the house; from the Ojibwe girl's viewpoint, it is somewhat strange that cows' milk might be drunk by humans and also that chickens' eggs might be stolen to be eaten; Clarissa, on the other hand, is amazed by Andeg, Omakayas's pet crow. Another time, on their way to pay a visit to the Break-Apart Girl, Angeline and Omakayas notice the amount of garbage accumulated by the Chimookomanag. Their remark stresses the fact that theirs is a migrant way of life and that, conversely, the European settlers lead a sedentary lifestyle, hence garbage easily piles up.

Difference is also manifest in the manner the human body is perceived. On the one hand, Omakayas pities Clarissa's delicate body and it takes her some time to realise that the Chimookoman girl's body is just like hers. The reason that has led to the given name of Break-Apart Girl is unravelled — it was only a matter of dressing codes. On the other hand, being invited to join the women's sweat bath at Omakayas's and realising she is expected to undress, Clarissa vehemently refuses to go into the sweat lodge and swiftly returns home. Nonetheless, these girls also find a common ground in which they become friends. Thus, at the moment that Omakayas has to leave the island, she receives a carefully stitched piece of cloth carefully made by Clarissa and, after an unsuccessful attempt to take her dog Makataywazi along, Omakayas entrusts her friend with him.

However, at times, the contact established is deadly. The Europeans bring not only different customs but also diseases to which the Native American people in general and the Anishinabeg in particular have no immunity; hence, a disease such as smallpox is merciless. In *The Birchbark House*, it first takes the life of all the inhabitants of Spirit Island, with the exception of Omakayas. Then, when Omakayas has become an eight-year-old girl, she witnesses the death of her own baby brother in her arms to the same disease. Smallpox's second arrival is made during a winter celebration at the dance lodge of the Island of the Golden-Breasted Woodpecker. While the community is enjoying summer delicacies, "something happened that disturbed everyone and changed the course of the winter. Indeed, what happened changed the way Omakayas and her family lived then on" (*BBH* 142): a visitor enters and, the following day, he dies of smallpox. Subsequently, the community suffers acutely for, at the time, Ojibwe medicine is unacquainted with such a disease and ineffective, unable to prevent prolonged agony and even death.

3.2.8 Story and History

In Erdrich's storylines, Anishinabeg and Europeans overcome some cultural differences yet, with respect to the perception of land, neither party understands the other's viewpoint. From the Anishinabe standpoint, land is considered a fully-shared resource and, therefore, its sale or exclusive ownership is inconceivable.

Europeans, conversely, consider land to be a profitable asset that can be owned, bought, and sold. Hence, at times, Erdrich gives known history some space within the story. Nonetheless, adapting Nancy Peterson's observation on *Tracks*, these young adult novels work "toward an understanding of history not as an objective narrative but as a story constructed of personal and ideological interests" (Peterson 988). Thus, throughout both of Erdrich's narratives, the relationship between the Anishinabeg and Europeans deteriorates wherever they come into contact.

Initially, during the narrative of *The Birchbark House*, "there [is] talk of sending the Anishinabeg to the west", but "West is where the spirits of the dead walk" (*BBH* 77, 79). Moreover, according to Omakayas, "every time the grown-ups [begin] to talk, they [discuss] travel routes west. They [argue] whether the pressure of so many newcomers [is] going to send them the way so many others [have been] sent, into the territory of the Bwaanug, the Dakota. There [is] now constant talk of government intentions, plans to meet in council, invitations to smoke the pipe" (*BBH* 123).

Two years go by and, at the outset of *The Game of Silence*, as Omakayas stands on her favourite rock, she watches a few canoes approaching Moningwanaykaning and, as those jeemaanan come closer in her range of vision, she realises that it is rather unusual for there are far too many people in them and no visible products for trade; noticeably, "[s]omething [is] wrong" (*GS* xii). The newly arrived people are dressed in rags, their bodies reveal hunger and their faces despair. As the islanders come to understand, the talk about sending the Anishinabeg westwards has become reality and stands before them, for these raggedy people had been forced out of their land. Thus, there is need to "council, think, absorb the facts" (*GS* 17).

From the Anishinabeg perspective, the fundamental nature of the problem is memory. Whereas they rely on their oral tradition, European settlers rely on their written language. Nevertheless, even being written the Chimookoman way, the words of the treaty between the Ojibwe and the president of the United States have not been respected; indeed:

> [t]he ogimaa or the president of all of the chimookomanag had sent a message to the leaders of the Ojibwe. That message was simple. They must leave their homes. The ogimaa said that the government now owned the ground they lived on. It was needed for white settlers. He had issued a removal order. He had decided that land payments would be given out in a new place in the west. But the western land was the home of the Bwaanag. (*GS* 21)

Hence, at Cloud's suggestion that the Ojibwe might have done something to offend the Chimookomanag, Old Tallow suggests that runners should be sent to ascertain what has really happened; in view of this idea, it is settled that four men will go in each of the four directions, east, south, west and north, and other will go to Sandy Lake, where all are to meet within a year, "*[b]y the time the earth warms again*" (*GS* 27). After the departure, Omakayas ponders on the possibility of being obliged to leave the island and feels that, "her heart might fall right out of her body to lie forever on the ground it loved" (*GS* 30). Thus, the circle has begun.

The circle is completed a year later, when Cloud, one of the sole survivors of the expedition, returns to the island. The news that none of the Anishinabeg has disrespected the treaty allows them to breathe a sigh of relief; nevertheless, the Chimookomanag do break the treaty. Days go by until Fishtail returns but the news could not be worse: the Anishinabeg have to leave their island, Moningwanaykaning. Hence, Omakayas seeks refuge at her favourite rock surrounded by water, listening "to the ever talking waves" who said: "*All things change, even us, even you*" (*GS* 235). One year ago, standing at the same rock, Omakayas had seen the raggedy ones arrive; at this moment, it is time for them all to leave. Having asked her brother Neewo's spirit for protection, Omakayas finally listens to her heart:

> You will not take leave of your beloved and beautiful home in bitterness or in anger. You will not take leave in hatred. You are stronger than that. When the Anishinabeg must give way to a stronger force, they do so with the dignity of love. You will leave your home in gratitude for what the Gizhe Manidoo, the great and kind spirit, has given to you. All the spirits will help you, even the tiniest, your brother. Your heart is good. You are blessed. Go forward into your life. (*GS* 236)

At last, despite the pain, it is time to leave Moningwanaykaning, Island of the Golden-Breasted Woodpecker. As the move begins and they approach Bwaanag territory, Omakayas believes that, "[h]ere, after all, was not only danger but possibility. Here was adventure. Here was the next life they would live together on this earth" (*GS* 248). A circle has just become complete and another one is at its beginning.

Erdrich's conception of Omakayas's paradoxically fictional and real world "signals the need for indigenous peoples to tell their own stories and their own histories" (Peterson 985). These stories and histories are, in this case, told to a younger audience which is more likely to accept such a non-mainstream perspective. As regards the documentation in the novels of the matter-of-fact historical moments, that is "the dates, acts, and other specifics" (Peterson 987), Erdrich deliberately omits it. Furthermore, "by refusing to participate in such documentation, Erdrich's novel refocuses attention on the emotional and cultural repercussions that the loss of land entails" (Peterson 987).

3.2.9 Storytelling in the Anishinabe Oral Tradition

As with other Native North American peoples, the Anishinabeg assign storytelling vast importance within the oral tradition. In her aforementioned essay "The Metamorphoses of an Ojibwa Manido", Victoria Brehm considers that, since the myths and stories of the Anishinabeg available in printing are "in a Euro-American format, most versions of Ojibwa texts are compromised" (Brehm 678) and, moreover, as expected in any written material, "the modern reader misses a level of meaning given by oral performance" (Brehm 678). In consequence, it is a matter of relevance for the reader to try "to recontextualize the early texts" (Brehm 679), in order not lose "the meaning of the tales altogether, since Ojibwa narratives were not considered folklore by the Ojibwa themselves. They considered all stories to be true, whether they classified them as *daebaudjimowin* (chronicles from personal experience) or *auwaetchigum* (what Western cultures describe as myths)" (Brehm 679). Along these lines, the modern reader is expected to keenly suspend her/his disbelief with the purpose of leaping "into the earlier Ojibwa worldview, where nature was tangible and visible as well as invisible

and immaterial, and where all creatures were capable of metamorphosis" (Brehm 679).

In Erdrich's historical novels for younger readers, the oral tradition of storytelling is given prominence. In point of fact, the reader's attention is visually drawn to the stories told: in *The Birchbark House*, they are set off in italic, and in *The Game of Silence*, they appear in a different font. Thus, the reader is confronted with the significance of the oral tradition of storytelling in the lives of Omakayas, her family and community in particular, and of the Anishinabeg in general.

In *The Birchbark House* three stories are mentioned at its beginning, namely: Deydey's "Ghost Story" and Grandma's Stories, "Fishing the Dark Side of the Lake and Nanabozho" and "Muskrat Make an Earth". Taking into consideration not only his half-European, half-Native American ancestry, but also the nature of his stories, Mikwam assents to his elder daughter's express wish and tells one of his travel stories, his "Ghost Story". In point of fact, Mikwam acknowledges that this story might have not taken place had he respected his native mother's ways; conversely, disregarding those as well as his men's objections and, under terrible weather conditions, he decides to seek refuge at Where the Sisters Eat. This decision however endangers their lives for two starving ghostly sisters await the appropriate timing "to hold their feast" (*BBH* 64); realizing that he and his men are the banquet, Mikwam recalls his father's advice, "[n]ever let fear take your mind away" (*BBH* 65), and leads both ghosts to believe a bear has already eaten the men; succeeding in turning the sisters against one another, Mikwam and his men flee physically unharmed from "that spit of land" (*BBH* 61). Throughout the telling of his story, Mikwam not only stops the narrative but also uses different tones of voice in order to create a special atmosphere for his listeners.

Nokomis is the storyteller of "Fishing the Dark Side of the Lake" and "Nanabozho and Muskrat Make an Earth". It is during wintertime that Nokomis tells "tales about the world of manitous and windigos, tales of Nanabozho, the comical teacher" (*BBH* 171). The former story is told within a circle of women in "a little space of quiet" (*BBH* 132) and narrates the day Nokomis, at the time a child of "eight winters" (*BBH* 133), learns the story of her maternal grandmother's death

and witnesses her maternal grandfather's disappearance as he rejoins his beloved wife. Ultimately, the telling of this story involves five generations of women and hence strengthens their identity and role within the Ojibwe people. The latter story is an aadizookaan, that is, an Ojibwe traditional important teaching story and hence, at Omakayas's request, Nokomis gladly tells "the story of how the earth began" (*BBH* 171) — the Ojibwe creation story. At its end, as expected from the listener, the girl muses upon the story — pondering on her smallness and helplessness, Omakayas identifies herself with the Muskrat and thus understands the story's raison d'être, that is, neither a human being nor an animal should be cut down to size.

In *The Game of Silence*, Nokomis is the storyteller of both "The Little Person" and "The Little Girl and The Wiindigoo". The former is a story told in the autumn, after grandmother and granddaughter have worked quietly together. Omakayas is hence told the story of Nokomis's helper, "The Little Person" and, even though the girl already knows the story, it is a pleasure listening to it once again. Nokomis returns to her childhood and tells how, one autumn, she succeeds in tracking one of "the memegwesiwag, the little people" (*GS* 103). Having been offered "a tiny pinch of tobacco" (*GS* 107), the little memegwesi assures the girl he will look after her when times are difficult and, in fact, he keeps his word and helps her and her family through the harshness of that winter. Only later does Omakayas recall that "Nokomis told stories for a reason" and, although not pleased with it, she acknowledges that the purpose of this story is that her time "to go and seek protection from her own spirits" has come (*GS* 110).

Erdrich's brief but vivid preamble to the latter story, "The Little Girl and The Wiindigoo", creates a special atmosphere which succeeds in involving listeners and readers alike. Thus, it is told in a winter night, the ideal setting for such a tale; at that time, Nokomis's "voice deepened and even the wind outside quieted down to listen. Her eyes grew narrow and a cold breath sighed through the cabin walls" (*GS* 159). The story tells of a marginalized young girl who, with the silent help of a spirit, becomes the only one capable of killing a wiindigoo; at its end the listeners are reminded that, "it [is] important to be kind to the ones most helpless—the poor, the old, the children. You never know whom the spirits have chosen to help you

and even to save you" (*GS* 164-165). As a storyteller, Nokomis tells "the holy stories and the funny stories, the aadizookaanag that [explain] how the world came into being, how it continued to be made. These stories [explain] how people came about, and how humans learned so much from the wise and hilarious teacher, Nanabozho" (*GS* 158-159); thus, whilst enjoying listening to old and valuable stories, children are taught to respect the Ojibwe culture and values.

Lastly, Erdrich not only respects her forebears' oral tradition of storytelling, but she modulates it as she adjusts such an ancient tradition to the world of the contemporary Anishinabe in particular, and to any non-Native American present-day reader in general. This writer "involves readers in the experience of oral recitation by recreating for us in print the experience of earlier listeners who knew story characters but did not always know how a narrative would end" (Brehm 698-699). Furthermore, Erdrich's work "is a reminder of the enduring and sustaining power of cultural tradition" (Brehm 699).

3.2.10 Respecting Elders and The Game of Silence

Respecting elders is essential to the Anishinabeg. Taking into consideration their abovementioned belief in oral tradition, the elders are viewed as the bearers of knowledge. As clarified in *The Game of Silence*, the Ojibwe "[repeat] stories, songs, the words to promises and treaties. Everyone [memorizes] all that was important. Although people [scratch] elaborate signs on birchbark and [roll] them into scrolls, they [rely] on memory to go with the marks. Memory [is] Ojibwe writing" (*GS* 20). Thus, when an elder has the word, respect must be kept and silence must be made. However, the younger members of the community reveal, more often than not, some difficulty with remaining quiet; it is therefore time for the game of silence. As Louise Erdrich herself elucidates in a letter published in the "Extras" section of the first paperback version of *The Game of Silence*, this title "is based on a real Ojibwe game adults used to keep children quiet when they needed adult time indoors".

In the rainy summer of 1849, little after the arrival of the raggedy people, the community meet in council and "children [can] tell how important the meeting [is] from the degree to which their silence [is] required. The pile of treats [is] the best

ever" (*GS* 17). Respecting tradition, Nokomis sings the song of the game of silence four times and then, in a wave of interest, children start listening to the adults' conversation attentively and "[t]hat night, for the first time, . . . [n]obody lost the game of silence. For that night they knew the threat of a much bigger loss. They would all fear to lose . . . something so important that they never even knew that they had it in the first place. . . . They had always accepted it—always here, always solid. That something was home" (*GS* 19). A year later, after Cloud's arrival, people gather rapidly in Omakayas's family cabin and, in order to be able to listen to his news with the utmost attention, Nokomis sings once again the song of the game of silence. The last time Nokomis introduces the game of silence is at the beginning of the move from Moningwanaykaning, the Island of the Golden-Breasted Woodpecker; but this time, "the game of silence [is] . . . a game of life and death" (*GS* 248).

3.2.11 Becoming a Healer

Among the Anishinabeg, the knowledge and wisdom of healing is possessed by people who pass it along and preserve it from one generation to the next. Into this category of healers we may put Nokomis and Omakayas.

Omakayas's perception of life alters at the age of seven in her first encounter with the bear people. Once, on her way back home, she meets two bear cubs with whom she easily establishes a bond. However, mother bear appears suddenly and threatens the girl. Omakayas, trying to calm her, respectfully addresses the bear and apologizes for her behaviour. Apologies seem to be accepted for, a little later, mother bear leaves with her cubs. Returning home, Omakayas ponders on the incident with the bears and, immersed in her work, she senses that "[a] thought was coming. A voice approached. . . . once it was gone she would know something a little extra, as though she'd overheard two spirits talking" (*BBH* 35); hence, this time, "she knew the bear had visited her. . . . [and] when she needed . . . she would be able to call on the bear" (*BBH* 36). Omakayas meets the bear cubs and their mother once again before they hibernate and, this time, she is observed from a distance by her own mother; later Nokomis solemnly advices her granddaughter to listen to the bear people. In the dead of winter, after

Neewo's death, Nokomis sends Omakayas to bed one night without having eaten and her face blackened with charcoal. The girl is expected to remember her dreams in order to search for and find a spirit helper and, at the third time, the girl dreams with the bear spirit woman. The following spring, Omakayas's young bear brothers visit her and, after a piece of advice, she makes a request: "I want to know your medicine. I want to be like Nokomis. I want strong medicines to save my family" (*BBH* 202). Hence, Omakayas has a serious talk with Nokomis and the wise woman realises her granddaughter has been chosen to become a healer; then, Nokomis tells Omakayas about bear people: "bears dig for medicine. They are a different kind of people from us. . . . Those in the bear clan are often good at healing others" (*BBH* 207).

At the time that Omakayas is nine years old, Nokomis requests her presence as a healer's helper. One day, in the dead of winter, Old Tallow falls down a cliff as she greedily tracks a big white doe in the woods. Being kept warm by her extraordinary winter coat and her faithful dogs, Old Tallow's body is found by Mikwam. Ultimately, the old woman outlives the frost, but one of her hands has not been protected and remains cold for quite some time; although it recovers, one of the fingers dies. Hence, Nokomis has to cut it off and decides that Omakayas to be her helper, because being a healer includes having to deal with moments such as this one.

That year, Nokomis lets Omakayas know that she is meant to "go and seek instruction and protection from her own spirits" (*GS* 110). In order to do so, a child should take the charcoal, that is, at the beginning of spring, the child goes alone into the woods with a blackened face, thus revealing his or her purpose, and stays there fasting "in the hope that the spirits of the animals or of the winds, of the waters, the sky, the trees, would have pity on him or her" (*GS* 58-59). Despite having already dreamt of her protective spirit, the bear, and heard an inner voice telling her it is time to take the charcoal, Omakayas dreads the idea because she is afraid of what she might dream. Accordingly, Omakayas avoids it for as long as she is able to for, in her dreams, she has sensed a somewhat dark future.

At the end of that winter, a little before the ice thaws, Father Baraga asks Mikwam, who knows how to read the ice, to show him the way to a distant place of

the island where several families live and, in spite of Yellow Kettle's objections, Mikwam agrees to help. Nonetheless, they do not return within the expected time span. Nokomis lights her pipe and the family smokes it together asking for the men's safe return. Omakayas feels especially peaceful smoking it and, that night, she dreams of her father on "the island where eagles made their nest" (*GS* 209); it is the girl's dream that indicates to Miskobines, Little Thunder and Old Tallow the precise place where her father and the priest have been kept captive. Returning home safe a feast is held "not only to celebrate the return of the men, but to honor [Omakayas] a powerful dreamer" (*GS* 218); in the wise words of Miskobines: "Gizhe Manidoo gave you a very great gift, but you must remember that this gift does not belong to you. This gift is for the good of your people. Use it to help them, never to gain power for yourself. For as soon as you misuse this gift, it will leave you" (*GS* 221). Hence, it is time then to blacken her face with charcoal and go alone into the forest; Unlike most people "who went looking for a vision were probably hoping for an extraordinary spirit . . . an amazing protector to befriend them. Omakayas wanted the opposite. . . . she prayed for nothing to happen" (*GS* 226). Yet, after having a brief though meaningful visit from a mother bear and her cub, Omakayas falls asleep and dreams; "the vision she received and the stories she told, the scenes of emotion, good and bad, that she endured, was the story of her life. She had been shown the shape of it" (*GS* 232). Eventually, in answer to Nokomis's question on what she has seen, Omakayas responds: "Everything" (*GS* 232).

3.3 Conclusion

Louise Erdrich's *The Birchbark House* and *The Game of Silence* weave the story of girl who is a survivor and who lives surrounded by the love of an adoptive family. According to Purdy, "[t]his free and unqualified transmission of love and compassion is the redemptive force in the novels; it is not always the means to security for individuals, but it does identify them as members of a specific group and provides them with hope, attachments, and a strong sense of self" (Wiget 427-

428). Despite her age, Omakayas understands the seriousness of abandoning the island she has always known as home ground and still finds optimism with respect to what awaits her. Moreover, amongst the people who drive her away from her home and despite the language barrier, she finds a friend whom she cherishes.

By intertwining Ojibwe and English, Erdrich weaves a story of Native Americans and Europeans, not only with their differences and similarities, but also with their moments of conflict and peace, thus drawing story and history closer together. Furthermore, as Shelley Reid put it: “Erdrich has found an *and* to replace the *either/or* of Euro-American conventions of identity: for her characters, continuity *and* change, historical *and* contemporary influences, individuality *and* interrelation are of equal importance” (Reid 80). As the stories are woven, stereotypes are gradually annihilated as the reader shares Omakayas’s life experiences and contemplates certain subject matters: language and its significance; the circularity of life and time; the importance of names and naming; gender and gender roles; the Other identified as the Chimookomanag; the relevance of history; the role of storytelling in the Anishinabe oral tradition; the respect for elders; the process of becoming a healer; and eventually, growing up and discovering one’s identity.

Despite its not being her conscious intention, Erdrich does not deny that,

> One of the remarkable aspects of [her] writing is that it ‘instructs’ in subtle ways without seeming to instruct. That is, it enables the reader to see the world through the eyes of people from different cultures, different classes, and different historical periods. Sensitive readers come to understand that people from different cultures with different values and beliefs are human and similar to themselves in the most basic ways. (Chavkin 235)

Those sensitive readers are, eventually, bridges between rather indifferent readers or non-readers, for they have come to perceive the Other by putting preconceived ideas aside. The bridges that they have become are made of words — written or uttered.

4. Similarities and Dissimilarities Between Dorris and Erdrich's Young Adult Novels

It might never be possible to understand another world-view fully,
but with hard work, open-mindedness, and respect for cultural differences,
we can always hope to improve. (Gleach 200-201)
Frederic Wright Gleach

4.1. Introduction

In *The State of Native America: Genocide, Colonization, and Resistance*, its editor, Annette Jaimes, declares that "in knowledge there is power, and only through power can there be social transformation" (9). Literature is a privileged and subtle means of conveying knowledge and Michael Dorris and Louise Erdrich's works of juvenile fiction provide evidence of that fact. Moreover, in the midst of a culturally changing world, they contribute to the deconstruction of the concept Karsten Fitz, in *Negotiating History and Culture: Transculturation in Contemporary Native American Fiction*, defined as the inaccurate belief that perceives culture as being unalterable, thus consigning Native cultures to remain in a bygone past. Indeed, in Dorris's words, "[t]he Indian, by and large, was a motif embedded in the Americana of days gone by, not perceived as part of the present or future" (*Paper Trail* 170).

The stereotyped Indian is at the core of Robert F. Berkhofer's *The White Man's Indian*. In its preface, Berkhofer draws attention to the relevance of "the constant interaction between the past and present in molding current understanding of the Indian and therefore in turn the changing comprehension of past understandings as well" (xiv). Taking into consideration that "the Indian as an image was always alien to the White" (Berkhofer xv), the writer further declares that, "to understand the White image of the Indian is to understand White societies and intellectual premises over time more than the diversity of Native Americans" (Berkhofer xvi). Moreover, "[a]s fundamental White ways of looking at themselves changed, so too did their ways of conceiving of Indians" (xvi), states Berkhofer. In the five novels analysed here, Dorris and Erdrich's mixed heritage sets a non-

conventional approach which gives a face to the stereotyped Indian and, subsequently, destroys it.

4.2 Dorris and Erdrich's Novel for Adults *The Crown of Columbus* vis-à-vis Their Young Adult Novels

In 1991, a year before the commemorations of the quincentenary of Columbus's arrival to the American continent, Dorris and Erdrich's single co-authored novel *The Crown of Columbus* was published. In an essay entitled "Colonizing Columbus: Dorris and Erdrich's Postmodern Novel", Susan Farrell states that:

> the hard and fast distinction between 'Indian' and 'non-Indian,' between contemporary American culture and traditional native cultures, seems to be exactly what Erdrich and Dorris work to debunk in this novel as well as in their earlier work. . . . In addition, the authors are quick to point to the influence of their own mixed heritages on their fiction. (Farrell 123)

Furthermore, from Farrell's point of view, the "poststructuralist play of signification allows Dorris and Erdrich to reverse our usual perceptions of discovery and colonization" (Farrell 124). Pondering on Dorris and Erdrich's ethnic identity, it is a somewhat difficult task to define, for not only is it "always complicated and shifting" (Farrell 125), but also "because many of their characters play many different roles in the fragmented, postmodern environment they move in" (Farrell 125). According to Farrell, attention should be focused on Vivian, for although her "Indian background does not ennoble her, it may be exactly her position as liminal, as someone of mixed ethnicities and cultures, that allows her to accept the openness and indeterminacy . . . The novel presents that kind of openness as not incompatible with traditional native thought" (Farrell 125). The author of this essay moreover declares that: "[i]nvoking . . . the traditional Indian notion of the great circle of being—all parts connected—works to show that a postmodern celebration of multiculturalism is not incompatible with traditional Indian thought. . . . Indeed, cultural diversity was an established fact of pre-Columbian existence" (Farrell 126-

7). Farther in her essay, Susan Farrell considers that, “Erdrich and Dorris are . . . more interested in the present than in the past, in practical methods of righting wrongs than in magic, myth, or romanticized, tragic recapitulations of the past. . . . as in all of Erdrich and Dorris’s fiction, emphasis is on surviving that loss rather than mourning it” (Farrell 127).

Despite being a novel for adult readers, *The Crown of Columbus* shares several traits with the young adult novels observed in this dissertation. It is clear that, unlike the latter which are visibly set in the past, the former takes place at the end of the twentieth century. Moreover, the characters of the adult novel live in a world which is becoming increasingly global and, consequently, their cultural backgrounds are influenced by a diversity of cultural flows. Conversely, the cultural influence of the characters in the young adult novels is mainly restricted to their own communities. Nonetheless, each novel introduces difference in as much as it presents the Native American perspective from its own standpoint. With respect to the narratives themselves, they are circular and, just like *Morning Girl*, *The Crown of Columbus* has two narrators, Vivian and Roger, who succeed one another in the telling of the story. However, whereas the former novel ends with a letter from Columbus to the sovereigns of Spain, the latter begins with two quotations about Columbus’s writings as its epigraph. In point of fact, it is the “discovery” of Columbus’s lost diary that sets Vivian and Roger’s journey into the Caribbean — the setting of Dorris’s first book for younger readers.

These novels share several subject matters, namely: the concept of family; the perception of home; the relationship established with nature; gender roles; and, the notion of the Other. Their approach to life gives way to questioning and, perhaps ultimately, to social transformation. Hence, the readers are active partakers in the process and, therefore, they are simultaneously beneficiaries. Returning to Columbus and his conventionally worldwide renowned feat, the outcome of this misunderstood feat and its centuries-long repercussions, as well as to Dorris and Erdrich’s standpoint as writers of *The Crown of Columbus*, Farrell declares: “[t]he whole direction of Columbus’s voyage has been reversed as well, as the action in *The Crown of Columbus* moves from the West to the East. That

reversal seems to me symbolically to undo and heal Columbus's legacy of domination" (Farrell 132).

4.3 Similarities and Dissimilarities Between Dorris and Erdrich's Young Adult Novels

The young adult novels under analysis in this dissertation are similar in their principal interests. Dorris and Erdrich write from the Native American standpoint and, in this way, they introduce different Native American peoples, along with their cultures and languages. The narratives may be viewed in a chronological order and, interestingly, they were published in almost the same fashion, namely: *Morning Girl* (1992), *Guests* (1994), *Sees Behind Trees* (1996), *The Birchbark House* (1999), and *The Game of Silence* (2005). Respectively they take place in 1492, circa 1620, circa 1607, 1847, and 1849. On the one hand, Dorris's stories are single relatively short narratives written in an accessible language, with a few Native words within the English language, and they are told through the voice of a first person narrator. On the other hand, Erdrich's stories are sequential longer narratives written in English but continually intertwined with Ojibwe, and therefore demanding special attention from the reader.

4.3.1 Identity

Adolescence is an arduous process and some of its pains have been addressed in the previous chapters. However, another subject matter should be approached: the awareness of the self. Even in dissimilar contexts, both Morning Girl and Omakayas go through the experience of becoming aware of their selves. While Morning Girl is a pre-adolescent whose world has not yet been shattered — such an episode occurs in the sequence of her encounter at the very end of the book — Omakayas is still a child whose experience of undergoing hunger, loss and grief, provides her with a somewhat adult perspective of life.

On the one hand, Morning Girl is curious about her outer self and wishes to see a reflection of her face. Considering the fact that "mirrors were a big trade

item" (Chavkin and Chavkin 189), Dorris "came up with one story line about the fact that people didn't know what they themselves looked like" (Chavkin and Chavkin 189). Accordingly, Morning Girl tries to see "what people see when they look at me" (*MG* 30) but there is always an impediment and all of her attempts are unsuccessful. First, Star Boy seems unable to understand her, "[t]hey see *you*" (*MG* 31), but Morning Girl objects: "I wouldn't recognize myself unless I was sitting on the bottom of a quiet pool, looking up at me looking down" (*MG* 31). Then, She Wins the Race guides her daughter's hand through the whole face and Morning Girl is able to make her own description. Thirdly, Speaks to Birds responds to his daughter by instructing her to observe his eyes. Leaning forward, Morning Girl stares "into the dark brown circles, and . . . Suddenly [she sees] two tiny girls looking back. . . . As [she watches], their mouths [grow] wide. They [are] pretty" (*MG* 35-36). Greatly impressed by "those strange new faces" (*MG* 36), Morning Girl is rather intrigued about those pretty girls living inside her father's head, and only after knowing that "[t]hey are the answer to your question" (*MG* 36), does she understand their identity.

On the other hand, Omakayas becomes aware of her inner self in an unexpected moment of enlightened reflection. In Erdrich's words:

> . . . Omakayas suddenly experienced a strange awareness. . . . she couldn't help being just who she was. Omakayas, in this skin, in this place, in this time. Nobody else. No matter what, she wouldn't ever be another person or really know the thoughts of anyone but her own self. She closed her eyes. For a moment, she felt as though she were falling from a great height, plunging through air and blackness, tumbling down with nothing to catch at. With a start of fear, she opened her eyes and felt herself gently touch down right where she was, in her own body, here. (*BBH* 220)

4.3.2 Sibling' Relationship

As regards siblings' relationships, Omakayas and Morning Girl share similar perspectives and experiences. Both girls have younger brothers whom they, more often than not, cannot bear but to whom they bear the responsibility of giving the example and, at times, undo their mistakes. Morning Girl further considers that whereas her parents have a partial perspective on her brother's behaviour, hers is

a more matter-of-fact view of Star Boy. Moreover, from the girl's point of view, "[i]t was as though Star Boy didn't truly belong in our family, and when I was angry I imagined what it would be like if he weren't around, how perfect each minute could be" (*MG* 14-15).

The animosity felt towards their younger brothers notwithstanding, there are rare significant moments in which they come to an understanding. In point of fact, as analysed previously, Morning Girl and Star share one of those special moments at the feast that follows the storm. Omakayas and Pinch, despite being "usually at war" (*GS* 62), have their "moments of truce" (*GS* 62). One of those moments takes place after a prank played by Pinch and a swift chase through the woods; having quietened down, the siblings engage on a special conversation and Omakayas confesses that she is "afraid of what [she] might dream" (*GS* 66). Pinch also admits his secret fears to his elder sister and Omakayas comes to the conclusion that: "Pinch was such a mixture of brave and scared, of pretend warrior and his mama's baby. He irritated her to pieces and then, sometimes, he was the only friend whom she could trust" (*GS* 65).

Finally, both girls have an intimate and secret relationship with the spirits of their dead baby brother and unborn baby sister. Omakayas's baby brother is Neewo and Morning Girl's baby sister is She Listens. Regardless of the fact that she refers to her brother as Neewo in the presence of others, Omakayas decides, as stated earlier, to give him a secret name only she knows, and thus she tries every bird name she finds appropriate. In respect to She Listens, Morning Girl's unborn baby sister who becomes the voice of the girl's inner self, her name emerge after Morning Girl's musing over it.

4.3.3 Home

Throughout the five young adult novels, the perception of home and land are closely intertwined. According to Dorris, "[a]mong our not so distant ancestors and in much of the world today, the connection between a person and a specific place has traditionally been intimate and consistent over time—in many respects one of the primary characteristics of both individual identity and group definition" (*Paper Trail* 357-358). With respect to land, the indigenous peoples of the

Americas consider it “to be a commodity similar in kind to air or water or fire—something necessary for human survival but something above personal ownership” (*Native Americans* 2).

In *Morning Girl*, after the destructive strength of the hurricane destroys their houses, people show little distress and easily move within the island in the search of a new place to build their accommodations. Yet, their island *is* their home. In Dorris’s other novels, both Sees Behind Trees and Moss return home after their impressive experiences. Rejoicing for leaving the forest behind, Moss realises that, in point of fact, he has never returned home, because he had never truly left it (*G* 76). He further understands that:

> Home was the place I never saw because I saw it all the time, too up close to see it well. Home was me and I was home—there was no space between us. “Not home” was too big to think about, too far away to reach. “Not home” was where strangers lived, where monsters roamed, where lost people found themselves when they disappeared. “Not home” was the last spot a person would want to stay, no matter how interesting or exciting it might seem for a while. (*G* 76-77)

Nonetheless, “not home” is precisely the place Omakayas, her family, and eventually her people have to move to. In fact, “[t]he Ojibwe were being forced west, into the country of the Bwaanag, away from their gardens, away from their ancestors’ graves, away from their fishing grounds, away from their lodges and cabins and all that made the island home” (*GS* 234-235). Forced to abandon their island and deprived of their homes, the inhabitants of Moningwanaykaning are aware that life as hitherto known is about to change. Conversely, the Taíno inhabitants of the island where Christopher Columbus and his fleet first disembark are not aware that such an analogous experience is about to occur.

4.3.4 Hardship

Regardless of their age, neither Dorris’s nor Erdrich’s youthful readers are spared an exposure to the ever present possibility of physical pain. In *Sees Behind Trees*, Gray Fire cuts off his two trapped toes so that he can meet his twin sister. In *The Birchbark House*, Old Tallow kills her yellow dog with an axe, due to his attack on Omakayas. Both Gray Fire and Old Tallow cut a part of themselves off

with the intention of protecting those they love dearly — Gray Fire leaves his heart in the land of water and Old Tallow kills one of her beloved companions. Again, in *The Game of Silence*, both characters and readers endure hardship. Acknowledging that one of Old Tallow's fingers has died, Nokomis has to cut it off and, therefore, takes Omakayas along as an assistant and future healer. Moreover, Omakayas also witnesses the death of Old Tallow's yellow dog. Whereas Gray Fire is driven by his feelings when he cuts off his toes, Old Tallow's cutting off her finger is a simple decision between life and gradual death. In addition, Dorris's description of the abovementioned moment is shorter and, consequently, less painful. Conversely, Erdrich's descriptions are longer and thus almost unbearable to read.

This point of view is again valid with respect to death. Both Moss and Omakayas are survivors, the former is the only surviving child in his nuclear family, and the latter is the only surviving human being in her island. Nonetheless, while Dorris provides a few short references to the fact, Erdrich describes in detail the event of Omakayas's finding. Moreover, Omakayas endures the death of her baby brother in her own arms.

4.3.5 Humour

Humour plays a significant role amongst Native American peoples and their cultures. In her essay "Native American Humor: Implications for Transcultural Care", Ruth A. Dean elucidates: "[h]umor is a ubiquitous element in human interactions. It smoothes relationships, enhances communication, and assists with management of emotions. . . . Humor is an important feature of Native American culture" (62). Furthermore, "[l]aughter, humor, and irreverence have long been associated with survival in Native American literature" (127), states Susan Farrell in "Colonizing Columbus: Dorris and Erdrich's Postmodern Novel". À propos, upon Laura Coltelli's statement that "[h]umor is one of the most important features of contemporary Native American literature", Erdrich declares: "humour is . . . one of the most important parts of American Indian life and literature . . . It's just a personal way of responding to the world and to the things that happen to you; it's a different way of looking at the world, very different from the stereotype, the stoic,

unflinching Indian standing, looking at the sunset" (Coltelli 46). Dorris corroborates this perspective and, as a writer, he believes he "would have a hard time writing a book without hoping that there was some humor in it" (Chavkin and Chavkin 216). From Dorris's standpoint, humour is "a mark of intelligence" (Chavkin and Chavkin 216).

In Dorris and Erdrich's young adult novels, humour is not a recurrent feature but, from time to time, it brightens each storyline. Taking Dorris's stories into consideration, both in *Sees Behind Trees* and in *Guests*, comic passages occur in the process of establishing contact with strangers. In the former novel, as previous reference as been made, Gray Fire instructs Sees Behind Trees to be noisy for the time has come to meet the strangers. Acting accordingly, Gray Fire shouts in order to make it clearer to the strangers that: "WE ARE PEACEFUL PEOPLE. WE HAVE NO WEAPONS. WE ARE FRIENDLY. . . . I DON'T KNOW IF THEY CAN UNDERSTAND ME BUT I HOPE SO" (*SBT* 66-67). Gray Fire's words are undeniably humorous, as he simultaneously wishes the strangers to understand him, despite its being improbable, and tells Sees Behind Trees of his apprehension. In the later novel, as already referred to in the analysis of Dorris's works of fiction, Moss questions his father on the possibility of repeating the experience of sharing the harvest feast with famished guests and the witty answer is: "Let the children of Never Enough dream" (*G* 116). Lastly, in *Morning Girl*, Star Boy's interpretation of the news of a coming baby sister leads him to question: "Why not a brother? Why not a wonderful parrot, like the one those strangers brought with them from another island last year?" (*MG* 17); to which his mother explains: "[i]t *could* be a brother . . . But . . . I'm certain it will not be a wonderful parrot" (*MG* 17).

With respect to Erdrich's storylines, humour and grief come hand in hand. In *The Birchbark House*, after a severe winter, the family finally alleviates its hunger with a special feast. As for "Pinch, whose belly [is] full, [backs] up too close to the hearth and [sets] the seat of his pants on fire. . . . In sudden inspiration, he [sits] down directly in the water bucket. Everybody [looks] at him . . . and then once he [is] seen to have suffered no harm it [is] Mama . . . who [starts] to laugh" (*BBH* 185). Thus, being the joker, Pinch prompts Yellow Kettle's first saving laugh and

shatters the sadness that had taken over the family since the death of Neewo. Consequently, as though understanding "from then on how important it [is] to be funny, Pinch [gives] laughter to them all. He [becomes] a joker, a trick player, and [jokes] on himself as well as others" (*BBH* 185). Then, at the end of *The Game of Silence*, briefly before leaving Moningwanaykaning, the Island of the Golden-Breasted Woodpecker, Omakayas unsuccessfully attempts to take her dog Makataywazi with her. In that sudden comic confusion, Bizheens finally gives his first laugh and, although Omakayas wishes "to take heart from this good moment" (*GS* 244), it happens "in the midst of sadness" (*GS* 244). Ultimately, in Erdrich's stories, humour has the benefit of healing.

4.4 Conclusion

In the introduction to *Winged Words: American Indian Writers Speak*, Laura Coltelli takes into consideration that "[m]emory, language, and storytelling tradition—so closely intertwined—are crucial to them [Indian novelists and poets]. Their personal and historical recollections map distinctive identities conveyed through a powerful language. Words, then, are not mere referents, they are life-giving. To use language is literally to create" (Coltelli 2). The process of creating goes hand in hand with the power of imagination and, what is more:

> imagination shapes new dimensions from the old. Stories from the past merge with the present, ever changing in their structural dynamics, ever the same in their unending continuity in tradition. Not surprisingly, narrative architecture often takes the form of a circular progression, as an ongoing concept rather than a geometrical design; the ending coincides with a new beginning, mingling history and contemporary events in the communal act of storytelling. (Coltelli 2-3)

Dorris and Erdrich's young adult novels reflect not only the mentioned power of imagination, but also the process of creating. The novels are testimonies of the diversity of Native American peoples and cultures. The voices that populate those stories are set in a past, but as they also reflect the present and, eventually, they intermingle both. Hence, literature features in the divergence and

convergence of solutions that are not definite. An inclusive understanding of the world might not be attainable, yet it is necessary, as Gleach declares, to work hard, have an open mind, and respect cultural differences.

5. Conclusion

From learning comes understanding. From understanding comes respect. (York 2)
Sherry York

In *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel*, Louis Owens (Choctaw/Cherokee) elaborates on the identity of Native Americans:

> There is no need here to belabor the long history of confusion, theft, and genocide everyone associates with Euramerican and Indian relations from the beginning. Suffice it to say that the struggle for an "Indian" identity—and a long battle between competing discourses—began with a European error that, in the fifteenth century, placed the North American continent, and the several hundred distinct native cultures contained therein, along the banks of the Indus River in European imaginations. Since that initial moment of entanglement in the metanarrative of Western expansionism, the identity of American Indians—or Native Americans—has been ever subject to the psychic cravings and whims of the European colonizers. (Owens 20-21)

Michael Dorris and Louise Erdrich's young adult novels, placed in the North American continent, portray a few of the distinct native peoples which inhabit it from time immemorial. Their purpose of untangling the stereotype of the "Indian" is not a simple yearning or caprice, but a clear sense of duty in order to restore the identity of the indigenous peoples of the Americas.

Dorris and Erdrich's books for young adults encapsulate several fundamental subject matters relevant to contemporary thinking about Native American cultures. Despite being set in the past, they are not in a time capsule, given that they clearly include present-day perspectives on the issues they deal with. Both writers and their readers are inherently outsiders to that past and, in addition, many if not most readers are probably outsiders to the indigenous peoples and cultures of the narratives as well. Such books are conceived of didactically in that they are positioned so as to change the stereotypical view of Native Americans. Dorris and Erdrich's works of juvenile fiction encourage respect for cultural diversity and promote the acknowledgement of difference, aims which have become generalised across the curricula of different subjects (social studies,

geography, history, foreign language study, for instance) in many countries. In their case, however, they are not simply supporting a present-day perception of the need for greater inter-cultural understanding, they are fighting for the life-in-representation, and all the practical consequences that flow from that, of their own people.

According to Owens, "[a]s nearly every Native American author has sought to demonstrate, the loss of the past means a loss of self, a loss of order and meaning in the present moment, and an inability to contemplate a future that is part of that moment. Storytelling serves to prevent that loss" (Owens 198). In Dorris and Erdrich's young adult novels, the voices of the protagonists resonate through a far chronological past and reach the present time. These storylines approach the difficult times of later childhood and early adolescence and account for the process of constructing a personal identity. The stories are woven through history moments which entail divergence and convergence of points of view, similarities and dissimilarities amongst those who populated North America from late fifteenth century to late nineteenth century. Both protagonist and reader have to ponder on diverse issues: the circularity of life and time; language and its significance; the importance of names and naming; the relevance of nature and the senses; the process of becoming a healer; respect for elders; the value of the family; loneliness and solitude; the experience of a vision quest; gender and gender roles; the relevance of storytelling in the Native American oral tradition; the relevance of history; establishing contact with strangers, i.e., perceiving the Other; eventually, growing up and discovering one's identity.

With respect to the young adult novels under analysis in this dissertation, namely Michael Dorris's *Morning Girl*, *Guests*, and *Sees Behind Trees*, and Louise Erdrich's *The Birchbark House* and *The Game of Silence*, they attest to the assumptions made at the beginning of this dissertation. In other words, these novels, and their writers through them, convey the notion of cultural respect as essential within the present-day world, address younger generations who are more open to cultural difference, sustain that the concept of cultural difference implies critical cultural respect, view literature as a privileged field for conveying different ideas and perspectives, account for the importance of Native American literature

within the North American context which is perceived as multicultural, and, eventually, perceive human imagination as an unlimited field where different cultural flows are accepted.

Pondering further on Louise Erdrich's young adult novels *The Birchbark House* and *The Game of Silence*, curiosity is aroused as to the ensuing events in the life of Omakayas and her family. Nonetheless, as previously mentioned, *Twelve Moons Running*, the third book in a planned series of nine books, is expected to be published in a near future. This literary plan for younger readers is reminiscent of Laura Ingalls Wilder's the *Little House* series of books for children. Even so, Wilder's books portray a family of European settlers in the Midwest and Erdrich's books, as observed in this dissertation, present the reader the life of a family of Native Americans. Additionally, taking Erdrich's novels for adults into consideration, the subsequent novels in this series for younger readers disclose a literary work worthy of reflection. A few subject matters might be observed: history and story; language; religion; Anishinabeg medicine people; the concept of family; the sense of community; the notion of land; the perception of the Other; gender and gender roles; the significance of storytelling; and, eventually, the relevance of this series of historical novels within the world of young adult literature written in English.

Michael Dorris and Louise Erdrich's narratives instigate their readers to view the world differently. Their stories' remarkable point of view puts into perspective the relationship established between Native Americans and European settlers, the relationship between me and the other who is different. The stories tell of utterly painful moments and of blissfully thrilling moments, guiding the reader throughout the "path into the great swirl of humanity" (Dorris and Buchwald, xiv). The power of words buzzes in the throat and trembles on the lips, and words blend past, present, and hopefully, a brighter future.

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